The Paris Review

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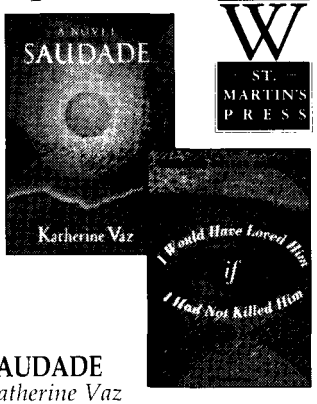

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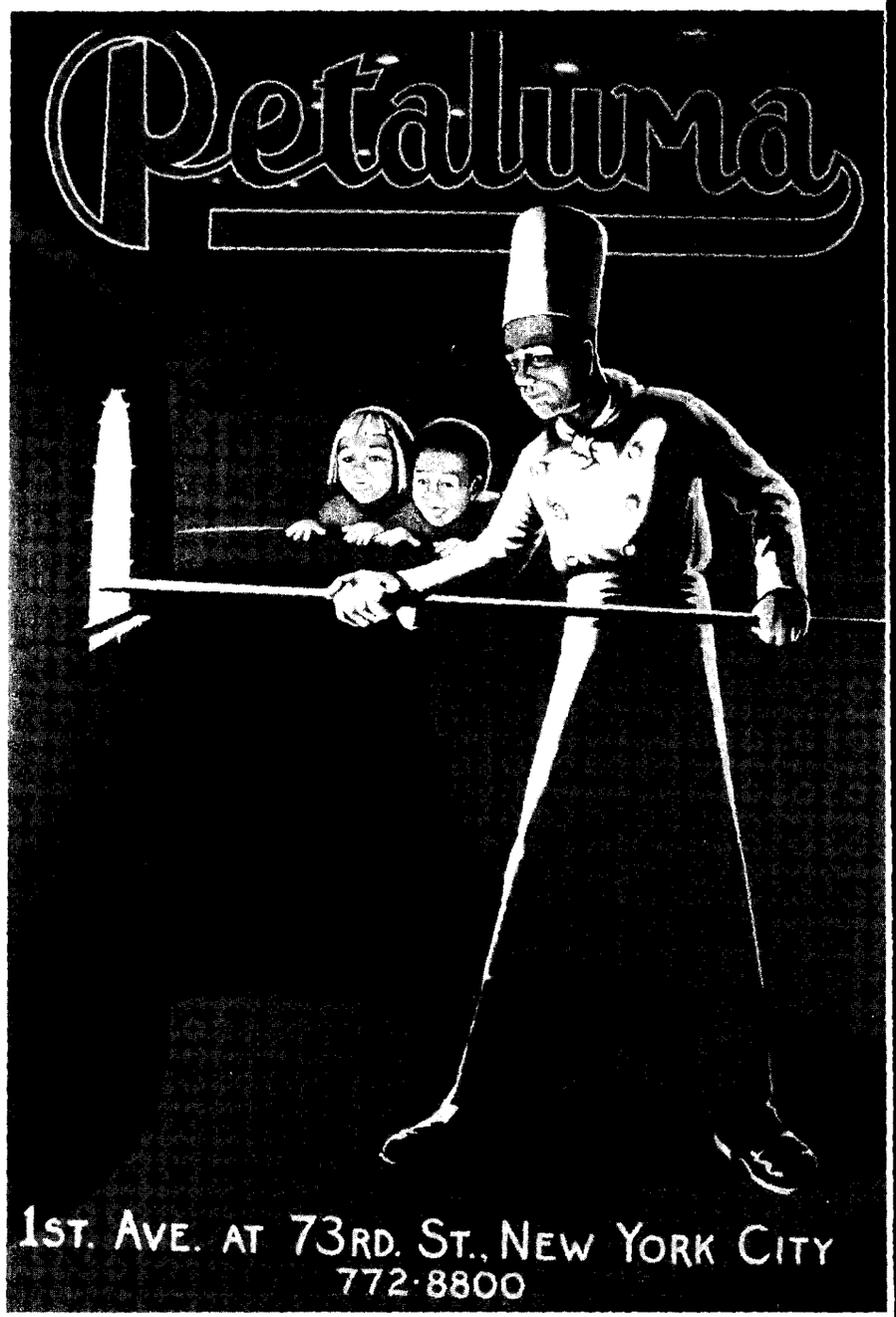

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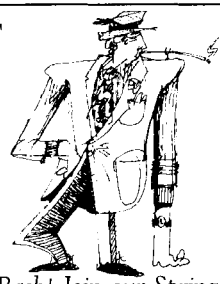

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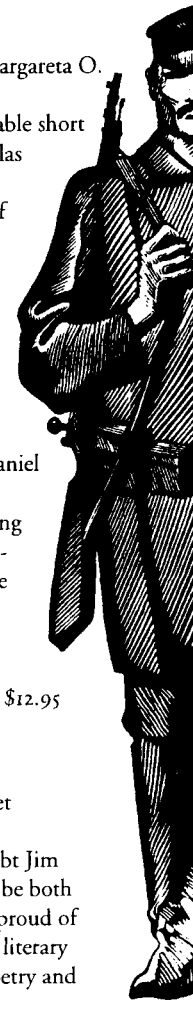

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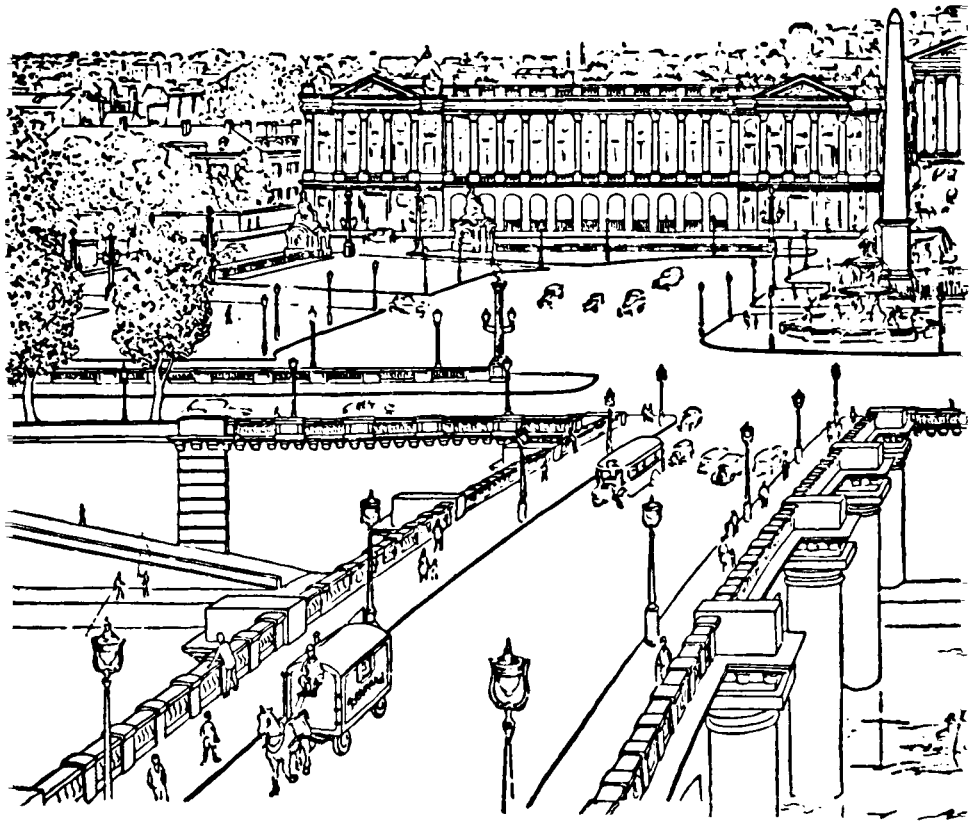

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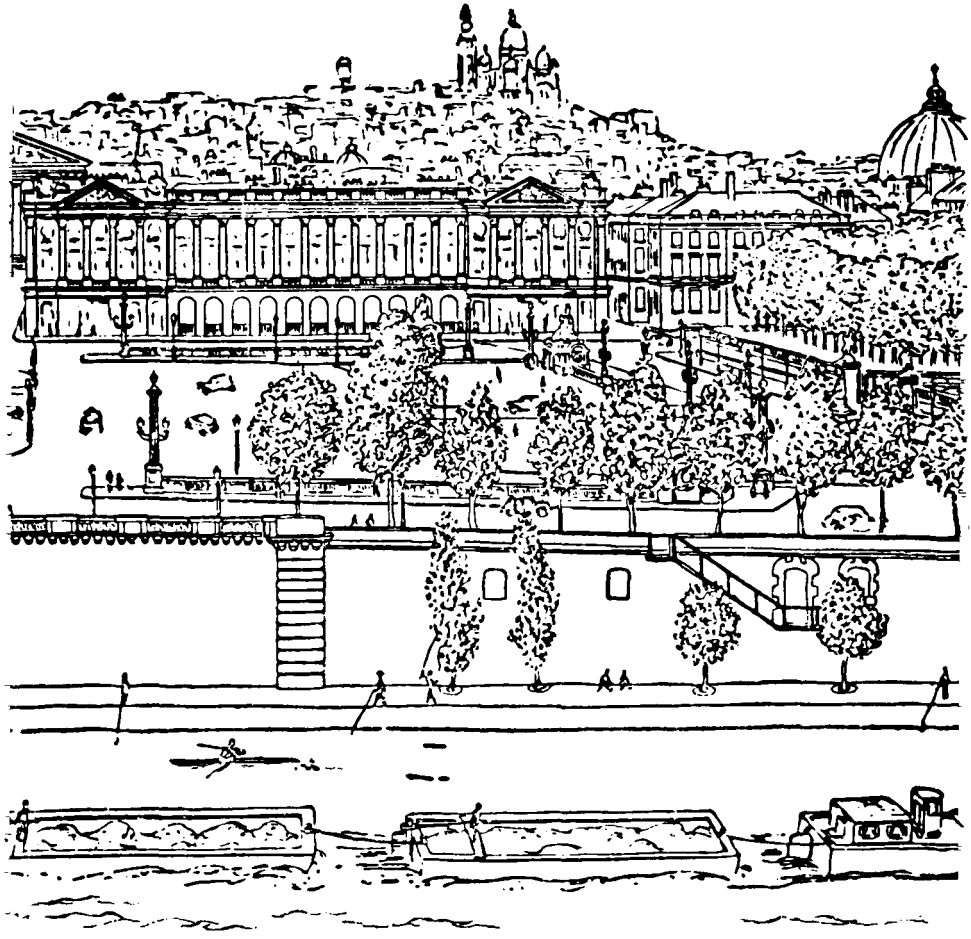

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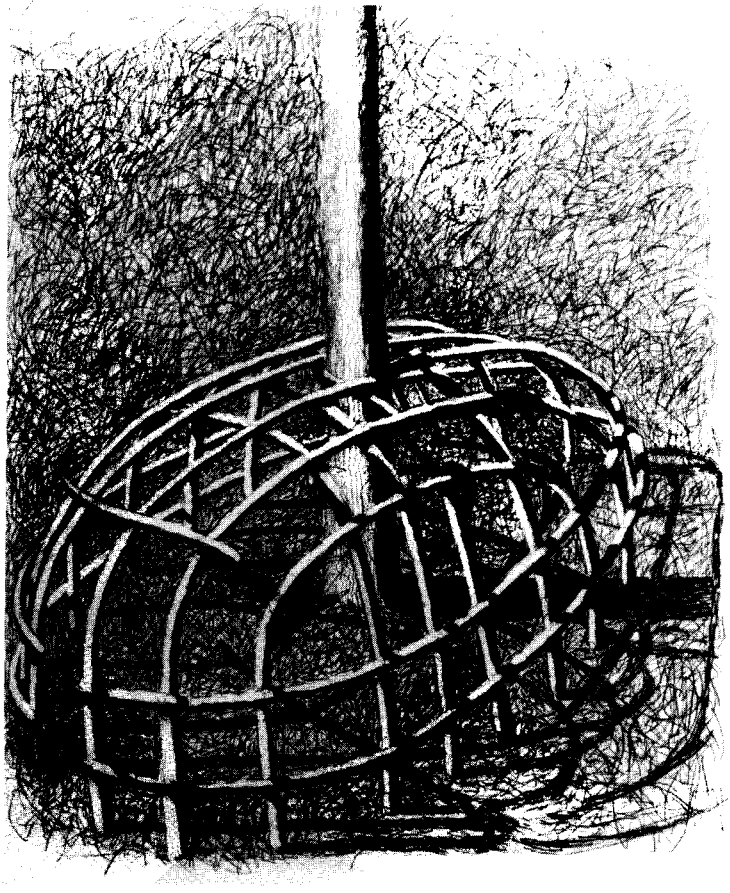
Number 131

Interviews

Alice Munro	*The Art of Fiction CXXXVII*	226
Yves Bonnefoy	*The Art of Poetry LXIX*	108

Features

Elizabeth Bishop—May Swenson	*Correspondence*	171
Umberto Eco	*How to Travel with a Salmon*	309



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Fiction

Rebecca T. Godwin	*Keeper of the House*	161
Rick Moody	*The Ring of Brightest Angels around Heaven*	16
Alice Munro	*Spaceships Have Landed*	265
Melissa Pritchard	*The Instinct for Bliss*	187

Art

John Alexander	*Glory Bound*	cover
Michael Scott	*Enamel on Aluminum*	219
Lee Tribe	*Drawings*	134

Poetry

Agha Shahid Ali	*A History of Paisley*	208
Ingeborg Bachmann	*Two Poems*	141
Maureen Bloomfield	*Two Poems*	94
Cathleen Calbert	*In Praise of my Young Husband*	147
Anne Babson Carter	*Three Blocks from San Marco*	211
Jane Cooper	*Seventeen Questions about King Kong*	307
Alfred Corn	*Insertion Arias*	203
Mike Decker	*The River*	213
Ben Downing	*Three Poems*	144
John Drury	*Two Poems*	149
Clayton Eshleman	*Homuncula*	304
Irving Feldman	*The Little Children of Hamelin*	89
Stephen Gibson	*The Bra*	102
Marilyn Hacker	*Cancer Winter*	296
Geoffrey H. Hartman	*Four Poems*	152
Stella Johnston	*Julian*	214
Caroline Knox	*Kilim*	146
Philip Levine	*Two Poems*	86
James Merrill	*Tony: Ending the Life*	81
Gary Mitchner	*On the Western Edge*	106
Peggy Penn	*Two Poems*	158
Bin Ramke	*Art. Love. Geology*	97
Kay Ryan	*Matrigupta*	295
Grace Schulman	*Bestiaries*	205
Reginald Shepherd	*Three Poems*	103
Kay Sloan	*Breakfast at Keseberg's Diner*	100
Jordan Smith	*The Dream of Horses*	217

Notes on Contributors 312

Notice 316

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The Ring of Brightest Angels around Heaven

Rick Moody

I

The Ruin—where my friend Jorge Ruiz spent some of his nights—was decorated in twisted car parts and fruitless conversation and postindustrial clutter, in the collision of strangers and in the flicker of lost opportunities. Some of it was decoration; some of it was left over from whatever manufacturing operation had occupied the space in the early decades of the century. There were, on the walls of the Ruin, the melted shapes of obsolete computers, suspended from the wall on old meat hooks. Those early desktop Macintoshes—Typing Tutors or Flight Simulators or unfinished novels still flashing anemically, in green, on their screens; motherboards splayed on counters and at tables with microchips scattered around them like a new currency. Gutted stuffed animals stapled up on the wall and mangled dolls. Floors covered in straw and fiberglass and asbestos and metal shavings and bent nails and

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tattooing needles and syringes. There were the rusted steel shovels of ancient backhoes: gladiatorial burial vessels. Volkswagen Beetles attached by chains to the ceiling: splendid and degraded chandeliers. The design vocabulary of the meat packing district—the meat packing district of New York City—made the Ruin what it was. It seemed hard back then to imagine clubs, these kinds of clubs, without the meat packers. The meat packers, the ranchers, the butchers. The broad clean wound that the butcher, ankledeep in blood, opened in the animal's arteries, the head toppling from the calf—in Texas, in upstate New York, or wherever this butchering was taking place—the neck stump quivering before him.

The butcher and his victim weren't all that far from the guy at the Ruin who left at home a disconnect notice or an unemployment voucher or an unhappy marriage or even a double-booked dinner at the Four Seasons or Café des Artistes so that he could open his mouth and quench his thirst on another man's waste.

The action was in the stalls. Were these *actual* stalls, Jorge wanted to know, at first, like stalls from your public school, transported into the Ruin after they had outlived their usefulness over at P.S. 103? Or were they carefully decorated stall facsimiles, with artificial yet highly suggestive stall graffiti? The designers, as clever as they were angry and remorseful, would never tell. People had come this far and they were paying a lot of money for non-alcoholic drinks and they sure as hell wanted everything, even the graffiti, to be contributing to the pungent and bracing sleaze of that club, the weird sadness that lay in the air like religious incense, like smells and bells. So if they weren't real stalls, Jorge thought, they were at least designed by people who had spent their time in public schools and who knew the code of sadism that lay at the heart of public school corridors, who knew the erotic power of handtools and dental drills and heavier machinery.

The logistics of *home*, the logistics that oppressed the regulars at the Ruin, could only be solved in this theater of detritus, of glory holes, of discipline and submission, of piss and shit;

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so they wanted home near and far, oppressive and yet declawed. They wanted stalls, they wanted industrial spaces, they wanted uniforms, and (in part) the threat of deadly diseases, but the sight of a balance sheet, the sound of a cash register, or the ebb and flow of ordinary conversation, these were the things that really ruined these patrons, that caused them mortal discomfort.

The guy on the table being fisted by two men at once, two men wearing black leather face masks with zippers across the mouths; the women with the penciled-on sideburns, with the dildo that glowed violet, glowed with a sort of strontium 90 kind of light; the woman who lightly, desultorily whipped herself, while mumbling an alphabetical list of sexual insults; the guy suspended in the cage with the daggers sheathed in his pectorals, *in his pectorals*—the possibilities seemed endless at first, but they weren't at all. The possibilities were marked by the faint, beveled edges of modern imagination, by the devouring ennui of the straight culture that the Ruin honored by opposing all the time, in every way. I mean, after a while, Jorge knew that the guy getting fisted was named Malcolm and that he was an assistant stage manager of off-off-Broadway shows and that he had a brother with cerebral palsy, just as Jorge knew that the woman with the dildo—who said her name was *Huck*—was from San Antonio. Actual name: Doreen. When she was a kid, Jorge had learned, she had been a Deadhead and an environmentalist, an artist of batik and macramé.

Every day the Ruin stayed open was a miracle of invention; every day it threatened to get old, to run its course, to succumb to legal inquiries, to file for bankruptcy, to liquidate its assets, and still the regulars came. They waited for nightfall, for the early part of the evening to pass, when the breeders had all gone home to their genetic responsibilities. They waited eagerly, but without a choice. The Ruin was like the psychiatric hospital where some of them had done time. It was a last chance joint with directions to the next last chance joint; it was rock bottom with a trap door in it—Jorge told me so—

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and after all, he knew about eschatology. He detoxed himself in the psych ward and came out again to tell of it. He got a prescription for that crystal, lithium. He had come to the end and found there were innumerable other ends in the cauldron of his city.

When Jorge Ruiz wasn't visiting sex clubs—and it was the question you always wanted to ask about the people you met there—he lived on Times Square. Middle-thirties, medium height, perilously thin, hair in tiny steel coils, a large burgundy splotch on the left side of his face, a birthmark, a speaker of Spanish and English and Spanglish. He had left his mom, who lived alone in Union City, to come to Manhattan. That is, he had left behind the outlying dilapidation for Manhattan. And Times Square was where he ended up, where it was cheap enough, where there was a high turnover of real estate because of death, terror, illness and the sex industry.

You know the throw weight of chance in these decisions, the decisions about where to live, Jorge told me, the kilotonnage of chance—you come one day looking for an apartment, two other guys are looking at the *Voice* the same minute you are. There are thousands of people looking at the *Voice*, really, but these two guys, these other guys, in particular: one guy ends up living in Harlem, one guy ends up living in Chelsea—and this second guy dies young—one guy ends up in Times Square. You all look at the same apartment one day, though you never really meet. Next day, you step on the same gray, stringy piece of Trident gum on Seventh Avenue and Fifty-third Street; the same desperate panhandler, in the upper forties, asks all three of you for change (he's a guy I knew in college, now schizophrenic); you fire the same real estate agent. But you never meet.

And in this way you figure out after a while how the people around you, in New York City, are like so much *dark matter*. You don't know who they are, you never meet them, but they shadow you. Your movements implicate one another; your good stretches and disconsolate moments are one and the same.

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Other New Yorkers, they are exactly like your friends, *your* New Yorkers, except for one small detail—Jorge explained—they were born in the D.R. not Puerto Rico, maybe, or their hair is a lighter brown, or they really prefer tea to coffee, or prefer boys to girls or girls to boys, or they prefer Techno to House or House to Techno, or they live in clubs like Lebanon, where people get stabbed, clubs that last a year or two and then are gone. These New Yorkers have three brothers instead of two. Or they never did drink or never did start smoking that shit or they never did finish school. Or they went to graduate school and now can participate in grand discussions about the city's duty to house the homeless or about the dialectic of literary-something-or-other that has, at one end, formalism, and at the other, *hermeneutics*.

These people look exactly like other people you know. That guy passing on Forty-sixth Street looks exactly like that guy you met on line at the Ziegfeld. That guy looks like someone from your gym. He's even carrying a gym bag. And in fact the two of them, those two guys you just saw, those guys who look like other people you know, they also look like one another.

In this city of the Ruin, *an entire manufacturing run of human beings was completed*, Jorge said, *and then the molds were all used two, three, maybe four times, to save money on newer molds, and if you are lucky you never meet your own double. If you're lucky.*

Which is not to say that we don't grow into the particulars of our environment. Twins grow apart; identicals grow apart. Ultimately we and our doubles—all of us—are seized by vain, idiosyncratic quirks. Landscape works on people the way diet does, or the way local television broadcasting does. People grow apart. They get kinks. Like it says in the Gospels: *Fortunate is the lion that the human will eat, so that the lion becomes human.*

So Jorge Ruiz, who lived in a neighborhood with a thousand kinds of nakedness, came to see nakedness as his vocabulary.

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With it, he tried to explain things, his merciless depression, for example. Jorge lived over a store that sold knives, just around the corner from a pickup spot called Sally's. The new Sally's, that is. (The name was lettered in the opaque window on Forty-third in browned, unsticky masking tape.) Sally's was as venerable in the world of transsexual hustlers as, say, the Algonquin—only a few blocks away—was venerable to the charlatanical writers of the sixties and seventies. The old address, the old Sally's, had burned somehow. Before Jorge got there. Suspicious activity. An unhappy or confused trick. A shortfall in protection money.

Around the corner from Sally's II was the Peep World, a midtown sex establishment of enduring popularity. It too had burned once; it too had struggled back from this calamity. PEEP WORLD! HOT! EUROPEAN! GAY! KINKY! BIZARRE! RUBBER GOODS! MARITAL AIDS! It was all mirrors and antiseptic spray. It was all lockers inside, like some demented public high school, like P.S. 103. There was a guy whose job it was simply to hose down the video booths afterwards, but sometimes he was backed up or on break, and you slid, or your sneakers squeaked, in fresh extract. Jorge had been inside, of course, had sampled video booths both straight and gay, had even made the acquaintance of this bored young man with the cleaning agents. His name was Ray and he stood off to one side like any other minimum-wage laborer—checking and rechecking a plastic five-dollar watch.

And across the street was the Priapus, an all-male erotic film center. ARMY BRATS. TRUCKER STUDS. TRAPDOOR TREATS. LOCKER LOVE. PRISON GUYS. HARD AS STONE.

At first, Jorge liked to watch the kinds of artificial expressions that played across the faces of the men, and even the women, who ventured past the neon entrances into these local enterprises. He was eating a Sabrett's hot dog, say, and leaning against a destroyed parking meter, watching. There was a certain way consumers of the erotic pretended that they were fortuitously drawn there, a certain low gear in which they traveled, a certain look they had that said—Jorge told me—

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The office where I am dropping off this important document seems to be right by this suggestive nude poster. Or, *There happens to be someone I recognize inside, glancing at that rack of . . . videotapes!* At first, these superficial acts of dignity pleased him. Or at least his apprehension of them, his apprehension of their hypocrisy, pleased him.

Until he was going in there himself.

Because after a couple of months in Times Square, he was visiting these addresses, too.

Like this: In front of the Peep World, the sky was the blue of colorized films. The traffic moved like it had never moved before. Somewhere the mayor of New York City was dreaming of pitching Manhattan to the Democratic National Committee or to the Grammys. His pulse raced in this dream. The mayor napped and dreamed of public check-signings and flawless photo opportunities and a Manhattan that operated like a Japanese factory, and just for one afternoon his dream had come true. It was a miracle. The cars were racing past the Port Authority Bus Terminal as if there were a civil defense emergency uptown; the homeless, including that guy I knew in college, had stirred themselves from their vents and grates because it was so beautiful. And that afternoon Jorge had followed up on a half-dozen leads for jobs, including a promising opportunity teaching English as a second language. True, he had a friend with that horrible kind of pneumonia; and his mother was old now, and wouldn't live long, especially not alone in New Jersey, but the breeze in the air nourished him today; he was like some purely aerobic organism, and that evening's full moon would hang above Times Square like the most fabulous neon. That day, no decision seemed wrong. The operations of chance were like a fine harvest.

There was a girl in some salacious poses on the billboard out front. She was the girl with a hundred aliases—Trixi, Candi, Belle, Wanda, Ginnie Mae—and her retouched curves adorned the doorways of every pornographic outlet on Eighth Avenue. Jorge saw a couple of guys in UPS uniforms check both ways and roll into Peep World, and in spite of the good

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luck he expected from himself that afternoon—he was even imagining tomorrow's *Post* with nothing but good news in it—in spite of everything, he was following them. His hand was on the slippery stainless-steel door handle—you had to open that door, you had to manifest your intention to enter—as he strode across the threshold. *How do they decorate a place like this? I was always curious.*

Inside the Peep World or the Show Center or the Nude Revue or the Triple XXX Lounge, Jorge learned, the girls were like the rest of the citizenry of New York: exhausted, overworked, frightened of the future, cynical, bitter, looking to cop. He talked to them, sometimes, the ones in the double-occupancy booths, or the ones who writhed on felt-covered tables, though he wasn't terribly attracted to them, though he had some deficit in sexual desire now, and this in no way endeared him to the women who were working. And he had little money to tuck under the elastic of their G-strings. Anyway, in conversation, Jorge was worse than awkward. He was an educated guy who looked a little weird, a little pasty, kind of ill, but also gentle and knowing and forgiving. Jorge told me himself that he talked the way a confidence man talks, trying to catch you in some well-traveled fallacy, or like a religious zealot, unyielding and lost at the same time.

—I guess this is supposed to be when I take my pants down, he said to the girl in the double-occupancy booth, that confessional. She was tricked up like a dominatrix. She frowned.

—You can do whatever you want, she said.

Sound of her voice muffled by plastic.

—Is there some . . . is there a kind of routine you do if I don't know what to say?

—Uh, sure, I guess . . .

—Touch, uh, touch yourself and . . . No, wait, Jorge said. Wait. Just wait a second, okay.

He sighed deeply.

—You don't have to do that, he said. You don't have to . . .

—Look, she said, if you're not going to . . . If you don't wanna . . . If you're not here to *get off*, why bother?

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—My money, Jorge said. My money.

A silence, as though they were closing in on something. Then at the same moment the invisible factories of chance manifested themselves. Like a lethal blade, the window guard slid down between them. Rustling on the other side of that impenetrable wall. Time for more tokens.

It was later, or it was another day. He didn't talk to the girls, the lap dancers, or whatever they were that year, he looked at the ones in the booths. Or he didn't even look in the booths, he looked at the video screens with their innumerable channels and innumerable parameters of chase and entrapment. A hand grasping. A cock, as large and brutal as some amputation stump. He simply wanted to see what was on every channel. It no longer had to do with wanting to see a woman *dowsing* with some bruised-looking phallus, or with some guy sitting on some other guy, taking the thing into him. Or a young girl moaning breathlessly. It was all just *want and flesh*, bodies melding in cold fusion, bodies without borders, bodies eager for the subterranean passage that led beneath and beyond New York City.

Jorge hustled from the video rack to the booths to the rubber goods, those handsome Caucasian and African simulated penises, strap-on harnesses, those ticklers and pincers and rings and clamps and devices of the rougher trades. Inflatable women, the sort without politics, pillowed, vinyl facsimiles of kindness. He hovered everywhere like a yellow jacket trying to get the sense of Peep World, he wanted to know, wanted to know. He was shivering with excitement, and somehow the shivering seemed to have its own separate strategy. Or as Jorge said later, *The thrill of pornography, well, it was around a long time before pornography ever was.*

Then he was back in the booths: Ray, the purveyor of antiseptic, reprimanded Jorge for accidentally pressing a button unlocking his booth too soon. Toothlessly, Ray mumbled, his lips folded back in disappointment and contempt to reveal the black rinds of his gums: *Don't open the fucking door till you're done.* Jorge settled himself again into the video booth,

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and he was finally able to stroke himself to the point of points, to the *summa*, and then he was grateful.

He was grateful that the atomization of city life could be dealt with simply on this cash basis; that the cobwebs that had decorated his oldest fantasies, the stuff he thought was his burden alone, could be cleared away just by turning some dials and spitting into your palm; he was grateful that the workers in the sex industry had, he was sure, kind bones. What more compassionate people were there? Who was more accepting of the desperate and lonely? As a profession of kindness sex work was easily more inclusive than either social work or nursing. He was suffused with a feeling of gratitude that was all out of scale with the brusque, impersonal machinery of Peep World.

And the feeling didn't last very long. It didn't even endure beyond the premises of the establishment, in fact. The expanding streets of Times Square—bubbling up and cracking, engulfing and digesting—had not evaporated while he was inside. That brief afternoon interval of municipal fellowship and teamwork had vanished. It had just been coincidence. Jorge was back in the old New York, the quarreling New York. What he wanted, what he desired, the city was taking these slowly from him.

He killed time, like other users of pornography, between the glittering entrances to Times Square. There were gyro restaurants—GYROS! PITZAS!—and passport-photo shops and the video-game parlors and back-dated magazine shops, the Best Western for foreign teenagers, cheap bars for the theater district and stores that sold Broadway memorabilia and knives, and cheaper bars for the hard luck binge drinkers. Lingerie stores for transvestites. Liquor stores with bulletproof glass and little slide-through slots for pint bottles.

And here was what he felt when he came out of Peep World (a couple of drops of seminal fluid riveting his shorts uncomfortably to his thigh): he could feel the charcoal and polonium falling from the sky; he could feel the urgency in every conversation; he could see that men walking the streets were fitting

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brass knuckles on over their arthritic joints. He knew why people went into Peep World. Because they were feeling really good; because they were feeling really bad; because they had had trouble at work; because they were having trouble with their girlfriend; because they had no girlfriend; because they had two girlfriends or two boyfriends or a girlfriend and a boyfriend, and they didn't know how to choose between them; because they were lonely; because they never got any time alone; because the world was full of hypocrisy; because it was not; because they weren't caring for the people they loved; because they were tired of caring for others; because the skies were blue, or their car had a dent, or their cat was sick, or they'd had an argument on the subway, or they wanted to live in the country and own a trailer, or they were tired of the country, or they hated tuna, or they loved rock and roll; or because they had no money; because they had too much; because they were honest with themselves; or because of chance—Jorge said—*because of chance*.

The neon of the gyro place, the neon of the shoe-repair store, they were all the neon of Peep World. Jorge confused the thresholds of these businesses. They were identical. Just like, after a time, strangers and the people he knew were one and the same. The neon that called to him in Times Square was all one sign. Follow your itch, it said, hasten your descent. Go ahead, dive.

His mother helped him out some, with money, I mean. She had some social security and some money given her by Jorge's dad, an Eastern European man from Edison, who had abandoned them when Jorge was just a baby. Occasionally Jorge put in a little time here or there—in a travel-book publisher once, temping, doing some clerical work at a clinic in Times Square. These jobs did not last because Jorge had trouble getting out of bed. It was Epstein-Barr virus or pernicious anemia or maybe just an attack of nerves. His mother had cures involving various spices. Bills and equations were tightening around him like the leather restraining straps you saw in the

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Ruin, or maybe they had always been there, he told me, tightening around him, a part of his life, bills and math and algebra and all that stuff he couldn't really learn in his public school, the school with the sadistic stalls. He saw the forms of these equations on his walls, he had actually selected a wallpaper with 1040-EZ forms on it—he had good taste in decorating, he was a tasteful guy, when he had the energy—and sometimes when he was particularly upset, he tried to fill in these forms. Or so he told me. He used a red laundry marker, the pen of choice for suicide notes. He never could get these columns of numbers to add up the same way twice, as he was often late with the rent and often finding bills that were black-bordered and threatening. *He couldn't work, he couldn't work. Work exhausted him.* Then he'd go to the Triple XXX Lounge.

Somewhere in the midst of these months tumbling inertly into much longer stretches he picked up the other most economically important commodity of his neighborhood, the name of which is such bad luck that it's scary to pronounce it here. I like its name, though, its first and last names—so many hard *C*s. A name that was made to sound good in English. In the Romance languages, it would sound ugly and hard. But here in the new world in the languages of Native Americans, the Anasazi, say, it would perhaps be the lovely name of an estuary or a long, rolling meadow. It was made for this continent. It was made for this place. Despite bad luck, then, I will write its name here: *crack cocaine*.

The street hustlers—the prostitutes—and the dealers in Times Square were all attached by coincidence, chance and circumstance. They were all acquainted, as in any other New York City business, and it made convenience shopping for vice that much more pleasant. Jorge had hustlers sleeping in the doorway of his apartment building, girls and boys, teenagers who wore the same clothes day after day, who had lice and open sores, who were hives of HIV. These kids were hustlers only in the most limited definition of the term. They would do whatever you wanted for a price, *they said*, but they

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wouldn't do it, really; they would get scared in the end and say that you couldn't fuck them in the ass—Yo, it's *dangerous*—or could they just jerk you off, or they wouldn't say anything at all, they would assume a stony and resentful posture until you gave them the money anyway.

They were just junkies, in Jorge's view, cross-addicts, crackheads, garbage-heads, call them whatever you want, they were ghosts, they were the afterimages of people once photographed or yearbooked or fingerprinted or otherwise entrapped in a devouring system of images. Ghosts, children already dead to their parents, dead to their principals, ministers, social workers, friends, fuck buddies, running partners, dead even to their dealers, ghosts who would for drugs assume corporeal form, as if crack cocaine was some conjuring stone. They were ghosts like he was a ghost, like Jorge was a ghost and later an addict, too, living far from his own neighborhood, far from his mother, sleeping all day, drawing the blinds, and then going to the Priapus to watch a double feature in which a dozen robotic actors with large mustaches pretended to be camp counselors or infantrymen and then unsheathed themselves.

So this shit these hustlers were smoking, it was available right in the doorway of Jorge's building, because the dealers and the hustlers were all mutually implicated somehow. They appeared at the same time each morning. They hung around in the same way. And that shit they smoked was cheap the first time around. So Jorge, after some months of refusing, gave it a try. It was cheap when you first learned about the way its network stretched out around you, about its system of distribution and shipping and sales and marketing, and about the way it traveled in your neural pathways, Jorge told me, *which was an exact replica of the chart of its distribution*—it was all bait and switch, divide and conquer, symbolic and imaginary, you were talking, you were talking, and the sentences were getting longer and longer and you were saying stuff to this dealer, who was also smoking this shit, in impossibly long sentences, sentences that mixed something that mas-

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queraded as euphoria with the most venal cruelties—Jorge was laughing as the guy called his girls *crackhead bitches* that first time, Jorge was saying that Dominicans was the crassest motherfuckers in the city—and the shit was dancing in your bloodstream like rogue cells metastasizing, and you were thinking, hey, this is pretty good, and then you were going to the ATM on Ninth Avenue and Forty-second for the fourth time that night, *that night*, uh huh, because it was almost sunrise and you hadn't slept yet and your money was going to this guy who wasn't getting much of it because he was a low-level employee *nothing more* and his profit was going to this guy back in Jackson Heights and his money was going to the guy who was *flying this shit in* and his money was going to some other guy who lived in the jungle who was using some of it to pay off the military government of his country, which was trying to pay off loans that your bank—the one that owns your ATM—made to this rain-forested country, and you, meanwhile, had one of those crackhead bitches in your bed, *gimme one of those crackhead bitches*, or one of those crackhead boys, sucking on your *dick*, didn't matter which, boy or girl all the same, the mouth around you right then was just a mouth—*suck my dick*, *you crackhead bitch*—and your *dick* had no *self-respect* left in it anyway, there was nothing left in you, in fact, you are impotent and it is morning and you haven't slept and the blinds are still drawn and you loath yourself more than you can say, fucking right you do, only that's too simple, self-loathing, because your revulsion for yourself is bottomless, could power a hydroelectric generator, and it sounds this morning like someone is trying to open your bolted windows with a rusty tire iron *someone is coming in* and the screech of city buses braking, they call your name, *Jorge*, on the wind. New York City is a slow corruption. It is time to find some work. To find some money to buy some more of *that shit* from that guy who lives on his feet at the bottom of your stairs, Jorge told me.

After that, after that first time, Jorge would have liked to have said that he stayed clear of the drug. He would have

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liked to have visited his mother in Jersey. He would have liked not to have his blinds drawn again and his cat tipping over cartons of half-eaten Chinese takeout, his cat chasing the cockroaches. He would have liked to say that he had bathed or that he had read the paper or even circled some help-wanted ads or cleaned the tub or done a dish or taken the filter out of the coffee thing or that he at least had one of those compulsive cleaning sessions that visited him when he had a hangover, when he went looking for every trace of the night before in his apartment, a night he only remembered in part anyway, shining his apartment, buffing it, polishing it, on his knees, short of breath.

But after a while he didn't even want to straighten out so much, Jorge told me. Getting clean required an effort he no longer possessed. This *aperçu* was the kind of thing people might whisper to you in the sex clubs. Someone sits down on the next stool and says, *My life is really coming to an end, if you want to know the truth. Don't say anything. Don't patronize me. Don't try to convince me otherwise.* Stage-whispered over the music. After a while, Jorge's resolve had gone the way of other New York resolutions. It became the style of some other Jorge, some other New Yorker, some guy who looked like him but didn't have his bad luck. The Jorge who had health insurance.

So he was at Sally's II one day. He had come up for air, and he was talking to a very nice girl named Crystal with whom he shared this penchant for grand dramatic statements. Crystal said, having just met him, *My life is fucked up when I am not high. I am simply at my best when I'm high. Being a man was just a way of slowly dying for me, I may as well just tell you. I am a girl like other girls. I would just like to have a husband and live a life in the Catholic church.*

Crystal's complexities, her physical inconsistencies, didn't bother Jorge. And he knew that Crystal would come with him on the promise of crack cocaine. And they walked up Forty-third Street, the way of all champagne dreams, the way to all Las Vegas weddings, and they walked right up to the

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little guy sitting on the hood of a car in front of a place where they sold fake identification cards, and this guy said to Jorge, because Jorge was now a regular customer:

—What the fuck you come up to me like this, what the *fuck*? You crazy? What the fuck? This my *business*. You're an asshole, man. What the *fuck*. What the fuck you doing?

He was gesturing ominously, violently at Jorge, who couldn't figure how he had done anything out of the ordinary. The dealer led them around the corner onto Forty-third Street, heading toward Ninth, making a number of lascivious comments about Crystal, about the size of her breasts, and, because he sensed it was a big night for Jorge, he quoted a price higher than usual. An outrageous price. For the crack cocaine. So Jorge refused.

And then his luck turned uniformly bad.

Now Jorge and Crystal were standing there with commuters swarming around them—toward the bus terminal—and she was yelling, What is the matter with you? She yelled anxiously as if what troubled her were not the crack cocaine, as if there were something much deeper, some life-threatening thing for which this moment was merely emblematic. Her voice plunged down into a lower register. She had a robust voice, a singer's voice. *Boys with breasts*, Jorge told me wearily, *they are angels and when they break your heart they take you closer to God.*

It started raining. It was raining, and they were standing there, and then she was swishing off in her high heels, and Jorge was limping after, No wait, *Honey*, *no*, *wait*, thinking she looked an awful lot like someone he had known when he was young. In spite of all her operations and medical procedures, she looked like a girl he had known in Newark, the first girl he had loved, Kristina, who had eyes like colored beads. Crystal. Kris. Which was which?

So he jogged back and gave his last few dollars to the hyena in front of the ID parlor. Paid the price. It was that kind of night. The dealer was laughing at him now; he was pronouncing grim prophecies in a dead tongue, as Jorge disappeared up the block. And then Jorge and Crystal were back

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at his place and they were grief-stricken, yes, it actually came over them like a contagion and they were crying and somehow they had gotten the rock and they were smoking it and they were making these rash promises like *their marriage would be a grand affair, with a reception that would go on for days*, and it wouldn't matter that Crystal couldn't afford the kind of gown that would have best suited her, and then she started to go down on Jorge and it was an act of mercy, really, not much else, and he put his hand down between her legs, because in spite of everything else, in spite of the fact that he was sweating profusely and grinding his teeth, he felt this was somehow a real chance to exercise those atrophied muscles of compassion, it was the last night he ever felt love, maybe, and he actually said this really stupid thing to her, he actually said these words, words with their own intentions and syntax, *This is the last night I'm ever going to feel love*, he told me, he told her, and he reached down there to the little chrysalis-shaped stub that had once been Crystal's penis before all the hormones and stuff—it was roseate and shriveled and it didn't exactly snap to attention—and he tried to coax something from it, some shiver of recognition about the structure and implication of contact, about sex and human kindness. Because at least he wanted to give something to someone else. Because if he had become impervious to his own feelings, he at least felt like he could give something to someone else. Crystal moaned as though she might come, but he knew that nothing of the sort applied. They were right near Broadway after all, and he was sleeping with a *guy who was more or less acting the part of a woman*, a top flight performance, a Broadway performance, and the moan was to attest to the success of Jorge's own erotic masquerade and how it made Crystal feel, ostensibly, well, kinda sexy.

And still he came. Depressed when the moment arrived, with none of that cocaine-self after orgasm, none of that grandiosity. Cocaine had emptied him. There was simply less of him than there had been in the early part of the day. No tranquilizer was going to restore that deficit. He was grazing

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bottom. His testes emptied their burden. He reached his arms around her. They held one another. Yes, and then they gave up consciousness.

In the morning, Crystal was gone. She had stolen the last few valuable things in his apartment: some silverware his mother had given him, an antique vase his father had sent him once.

I don't need to tell you of the grim movement of the next month or so, the way the utilities were getting shut off, the income-tax people bringing up stuff from years ago, the landlady threatening. These particulars are not unusual and so I abbreviate them. Jorge said that he *preferred to read by candlelight*, as solitary readers had done for centuries, and he had no need for a phone. He called his mother collect from the street.

He began shooting heroin as a matter of course. It was the equal and opposite reaction to what I have been describing. It was just another thing to do, heroin or speedballs, and it actually served to broaden him in a way: it got him out of the house. It got him into Harlem, where one of those guys he had never met, the guy who looked at his very apartment right before he took it, was also shooting dope. It got him into the East Village, where there were a number of other people he would never meet, but who were quite close to him—a friend of mine, in fact, Dave, with whom I went to college, and a girl Dave almost went on a blind date with once, and a painter from the gallery Dave's never-to-have-been blind date once worked at. All these people were in Harlem or on the Lower East Side, putting money in a pail that a guy was whisking into a rundown tenement building. Heroin got Jorge into the East Village, from which it took him a really long time to get home when he was high. And it got him, in the end, into the Ruin. His habit wasn't gigantic, but he was starting to take risks. His arms were pocked here and there. The Ruin followed directly from that. It was no longer a matter of any bio-electrical orgasmic *spike*. Orgasm was out of the

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question. The Ruin was where Jorge felt relaxed, to the degree that relaxation was an idea he still understood. Listen, he said to me, *Times Square is a place you live because it's the only place left where you feel like you are comfortable*. And this is true of this club, too, *and maybe even true of all of Nueva York*. He could have lived in San Juan, say, or in Bridgeport or Toronto, but the ebb and flow of macroeconomics had brought him here, and he had relaxed into chance the way one grows attached to a shirt that is a size too big.

Maybe he heard about the Ruin from some of the women at Peep World or Sally's II (where he went later to look for Crystal, to beat her senseless, but he never did find her), or maybe he was just drawn there by walking aimlessly along the desolate streets beside the West Side Highway. He was wearing khaki pants and a Hawaiian-print shirt and a belted leather jacket and a gold necklace. He had a beard now and his eyes had that disembodied, unsouled look of junkies, and he recognized no ordinary human boundary in conversation. *I've been looking at you all night*, he said to me in the Ruin. And then he told me what I have told you. There was no emotion in him, he was as gray as a blank screen, but at the same time there were in him all the regrets of this city. The story of his decline and fall was marked by repetition and coincidence. The same opinions again and again, in further states of decay, the same complaints about the city, about how the museums were fascist and all the good clubs were closed, and how the best neighborhoods were off-limits for a person of his origins.

What happened to him that night after I met him at the Ruin I am able to tell you. What happened to him after he started shooting dope and before he detoxed himself, Jorge's story, or the part of it that I know, ends this way: we talked above the din of industrial racket. There were dancers in studded leather underwear. A night in June. Jorge disappeared into one of the stalls. When he came out again he was jaundiced. I was thinking about going to an after-hours bar. Jorge said he was going home, but instead he went down to the East Village, to a *cop shop* he had heard about. This I learned

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later. A bakery on Eighth Street and Avenue D that was a front for a heroin operation. Jorge didn't know the East Village well, though, and so when he got off the subway at Astor Place, he wandered block after block into the rubble of that neighborhood trying to find the bakery. It was deep in the night now, and he was trying to find it, the silhouettes of these abandoned blocks were ominous, and he was feeling sick and shaking, and he didn't think he was ever going to sleep again, going up and down Eighth Street, thinking about how to get out of this neighborhood and back into Times Square without being bashed or robbed or murdered or anything else, and also not thinking about it, but thinking—with the one last flickering neurotransmitter given over to ordinary human curiosity—*how was the place*, *the bakery*, *going to be decorated*?

Starless sky. The only pedestrian traffic working the same line of business that Jorge was engaged in. When he finally found the bakery, by chance, oblivious to a sudden confluence of meteors above the city, he was as lost as he would ever get in his short life. He was sick, he told me. *I was sick*.

II

Everyone in New York City does not go to sex clubs. Above Fifty-seventh Street on the East Side they march to and from hired cars as if the subway and its content were television fictions. There is the guy with the private life up here, with the call girl problem or the fucking-boys-in-a-motel-in-the-Bronx problem. There is the ragged teenager whose ambition is to throw off his or her Upper East Side address, the kid who takes the limo to the shooting gallery on Lexington and 125th, but truly this Upper East Side is a separate city, where only the occasional skirmish with the New York of this story takes place. The Upper East Side has its loneliness, it has its isolation, it has its lost opportunities, its disintegrating families, it has its murder and its addiction and its adultery and homosexuality,

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sure, but all this is *cushioned*. Disconsolation drifts out of the Upper East Side, in some river of chance, drifts neglected like waste, until it lands somewhere else.

So another friend I knew from that time, Toni Gardner, went to a club called Wendy's. Saturday nights in the meat packing district. In the same space as the Ruin. A club for women. *Private sex parties*. They had auctions. You could *auction yourself*. There was a line of those willing to be auctioned. It snaked back to the black plywood bar. A lot of people wanted to participate. If you were willing to wait for a while, you could know your value.

The auctioneer, a woman in her forties, specialized in a certain stage patter ironically imitative of the classic auction house style. The Christie's and Sotheby's style. She was well-dressed and knowledgeable and articulate about the artifacts at hand. Her argot was full of hyperbolic folderol, jokes and salacious commentary, and it was delivered at an unintelligible pace. She enabled, through the blur of her rhetoric, a host of ritual couplings all based upon principles of chance and economics. On the other hand, maybe she was like the country auctioneer, sending off the calf to be made veal: *Woman of the age of twenty-five, hair the color of cinnamon, eyes an arctic blue, height and weight, well, she's of a certain size—she's in tip-top physical condition—note the breasts, fountains of maternity, which I can only describe to you by falling into the use of those old metaphors—perfect fruits—and an ass to die for, yeah to die for—yes, this dyke can sing, I can promise you that—in these black jeans, well she will do whatever transports you, this young dyke of twenty-five—I can promise you, and let's start with an opening bid of a hundred and fifty dollars for the evening; do I hear a hundred and fifty, yeah, one seventy-five, who will pay one seventy-five for this auburn beauty from the country, from the . . . from the state of Maine, that's right—never visited these precincts before and ready to be broken on the rack of your choice, fresh from the unforgiving and dramatic coasts of Maine—unwise in the ways of Manhattan—do I hear one seventy-five, one ninety, do I*

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have one ninety, two hundred dollars—she assures me she can take a dildo all the way to its rubberized base, two twenty-five, do I hear, two thirty—a bottom, yeah, she's a bottom of compliance such as you have never experienced, SOLD! YES! SOLD! And so on until the obscure and almost unlit cavern rocked with the dynamics of ownership. Her voice now a whisper in the microphone, devoid of affect, the words delivered without feeling at all, just the words, a perfect simulacrum of auction slang and then you were owned. You were owned.

Toni was from the Upper East Side by way of the suburbs—she had never been to Maine at all—and she got out of that neighborhood as soon as she could. Took the bus down Fifth Avenue and only went back for holidays. I met her at Rutgers. When she auctioned herself after a few drinks, I was with her. She'd had a hard time persuading them to let me in. They quizzed you out front if you were a guy. If there was a moment's hesitation in your responses you were gone. *Are you a fag?* If you even quarreled with the usage, you were alone walking past empty warehouses. Way, way West. No cabs. No buses. No subways.

Back then, Wendy's was just coming into prominence as an event. It was making a transition from a prior location, where it had simply been a bar, and the flyers were getting more and more aggressive: *Wendy's, the dungeon of destiny for discerning dykes.* Or: *Wendy's, Cruising, Dancing, Humiliation.* Toni had recently stumbled into the new room in the back, the one with the vinyl bed in it, and she often found bodies writhing there, including, once, the body of a composition professor we'd had at Rutgers. *She gave the stupidest assignments.* Wendy's sprouted these new rooms, like a starfish regrowing itself. Private rooms down this long, gaslit corridor. Like the steam tunnels under the Rutgers campus. Tunnels like architectural diagrams for the uterine and fallopian insides of the customers. Wendy's was a mystery. You could never tell if the pool table would be there, if the cages would be there, if the bartender who was alluring last week still had her shift. The specifics came and went. Including

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the pertinent information. Wendy's operated on Saturday nights, as it had once operated only on Thursdays; it changed locations. It had a phone. It didn't. It had live music. It didn't. Sometimes it was in the meat-packing district and sometimes it was gone altogether.

Likewise being auctioned that night were the services of a first-rate dominatrix, who would demonstrate her gifts on the premises, later in the evening. A tattooist and scarification expert also auctioned some work. One of the bartenders auctioned herself. We were supposed to use *play money*, simulated legal tender bills, but this counterfeiting diluted the effect of the transaction. Therefore a subterranean market existed that featured real cash. Toni got into this long unruly line—she was soon to be the beauty from Maine, the cinnamon-haired beauty—after we'd sat there a while, excitably. And it wasn't so strange that she did it, really. The auction wasn't that far, say, from a *coming out party* back in Montclair, where Toni had lived as a kid.

Things weren't going well for her professionally. She didn't really know what she wanted to do; she had spent a couple of years talking in therapy about *vocational choice anxiety*. And she had flipped a car in Long Island visiting her parents' summer house. She owed them a lot of money for it. She'd moved out of the Upper East Side after being engaged to a nice boy with a legal practice. Toni auctioned herself to slip these binds. She did it for fun, an amnesiac fun.

She danced in a go-go cage, beside the auctioneer, dressed in black jeans and a tank top; she made sure to sport her tattoos, and she affected an insouciant look, as if daring a bidder. This was *the* look among the lots at Wendy's auction—a look that mixed subject and object, *sub* and *dom*—and therefore not terribly novel. Toni didn't garner the highest price. That went to a woman in a sort of librarian costume who seemed to weep nervously as a pair of anxious bidders competed aggressively for her. She brought a thousand dollars for the night.

The music was speed metal. Speed metal with girl singers.

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The place shook with it. Toni danced. At last, the bidding was completed. Two hundred and fifty dollars. A scattered and diffident applause. The crowd parted a little bit, and in a movie slow motion the employees of Wendy's, the handlers, waved Toni over, waved her over to the edge of the stage, waving like construction flagmen, where *two* women were waiting for her. Two women had bid together for her. A consortium. They were fucking cheap, was Toni's first feeling, she explained to me later. *They were fucking cheap, they couldn't even afford to buy their own slave for the evening—they had to go in on one*. No way was she going with them. No way. They were cheap.

But then Toni began to warm to the idea a little. She was charmed, it turned out, by their garishness. By the ugly complexities they presented. She hated them at first and in her disdain she started to like them. At the bar. As she stepped from the stage, Toni took one hand from each of them—from Doris and Marlene—and they repaired to the bar. One of her owners was a good lesbian and one was a bad lesbian. The good lesbian was Doris, and she came from Bernardsville, New Jersey, but she didn't go to Rutgers like Toni Gardner did. *She went to Princeton*. Doris's parents were disappointed when she made clear her object choice to them, when Doris told her parents that *she was in love with a woman*. But they were supportive. (Her mom was especially supportive because she was in therapy with Dr. Bernice Neptcong, who had an office right in Princeton.) They supported her efforts to find a loving, caring relationship.

Unfortunately, Toni told me, Doris didn't want a loving, caring relationship exactly, or perhaps these terms were simply more elastic to her than might be supposed by Bernice Neptcong. To Doris loving and caring always seemed to have a certain amount of trouble attached to them. Love and trouble were really identical to her. So Doris formed an attachment with Marlene, the bad lesbian. Marlene was a tall, exotic sex worker—Marlene was not her real name—who had platinum blond hair and coffee-colored skin, who slept with men at a

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reasonably successful escort agency and who came home at night aggrieved by her profession. She drank a lot. She dabbled with harder drugs.

Marlene's cheekbones were like the sharp side of an all-purpose stainless-steel survival jackknife and her eyes narrowed to reflect disappointment and loss, which, when combined with her biceps, her violent and toned physique, made for a compelling female beauty. Doris, on the other hand, looked like an Ivy League intellectual. She had thick black glasses and she shaved the back of her head. She wore maroon velveteen bell bottoms and had a navel ring, frequently infected. She was a little older than her clothes suggested.

Marlene and Doris, Toni realized, didn't have much to say to each other. Toni didn't know, yet, that Marlene had just come back from a hard day at an escort agency where she had to fuck a whole bunch of strangers, guys for whom deceit was a simple fact of their day, who wove deceit and its responsibilities into their schedule like deceit was just another calendar appointment. And she didn't know that Doris also hated her job at the women's magazine where she worked on the copy desk—she aspired to write articles for *Camera Obscura*. Toni thought Marlene was the harder of the two. Marlene was like a teakettle almost boiled off. Anything could upset her, it seemed, any little stray remark. But in truth Doris was harder. Doris was detached and skeptical and full of calcified antipathies.

Their apartment was in the Clinton section of Manhattan, also called Hell's Kitchen, where Jorge Ruiz lived. On the night that Toni was auctioned off to Marlene and Doris, Jorge, as I have said, was arguing with a pre-op transsexual, Crystal, about whether to buy crack cocaine from the guy on Forty-third Street who was out to chisel them. At that very moment, while Jorge was just lifting the hem of Crystal's cheap synthetic miniskirt and pulling delicately on the mesh of her white fishnet stockings, Doris, Marlene and Toni were throwing light switches a couple of blocks away.

It was a small one-bedroom and it was draped in leather

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items, in stuff from the Pink Pussycat or the Pleasure Chest. There was restraining gear, and they even had a gynecologist's exam table with houseplants on it. The table had stirrups and everything. There was another decorating strain, too: Bernardsville chic. It was a kind of homely, countervailing sensibility. Doris hadn't been able to shake it yet, though she was in her thirties. She had a few museum posters, Monet's years at Giverny or the Treasures of Egypt, and some handsome black Ikea furniture and a lovely imitation Persian area rug made in Belgium. Her parents helped her to buy these. Doris and Marlene also had one of those little yapping dogs, a corgi or something, named Bernice Neptcong, M.D. Doris would say, *Get out of the way, Bernice Neptcong*. The dog was vicious. An attack rat.

Marlene had clamps, Toni told me. She liked to have you apply the clamps to her nipples and then, also, to her labia, though the best part, Marlene said, and Toni repeated to me, *I'm telling you—the best part is when they come off*. She also used clothespins, because you could take a little of the spring out of them, bend them back and forth a few times, and they didn't hurt quite as much. The three of them had already had enough drinks to loosen up—it was almost three in the morning—so their clothes were off in a hurry. They'd barely turned the dead bolts. Except that Marlene had this idea about donning other clothes. Once she had her clothes off, she was striding, like some carnivorous game animal, across the room toward the closet. She had a closet full of garments of the diligent bondage fantast. So they took off their clothes and they put on these leather chaps in which their asses were exposed. Shredded T-shirts through which the edges of leather brassieres or the slope of a breast were evident. On Toni, the costume was kind of large. She was normally in the petite range. Doris made her own selections wearily, as though this part of the proceedings were as new as selecting the temperature for a load of laundry.

Marlene had Doris and Toni attach the clamps to her body. She whispered brusquely. They observed a clinical, profes-

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sional silence as they did it—because the procedure involved pain and had the sobriety of pain. Toni performed her role intently as though the process were curative or therapeutic and because she didn't know Doris and Marlene well enough to chatter anyway. Toni hadn't told them anything—they knew nothing about her except her nakedness, the shape of her tattoos: the Ghost Rider skull on her shoulder blade, the Minnie Mouse on her ass.

Though now they knew that she liked novelty. Toni went down on Marlene. It was pretty hard to avoid the clothespins in that posture, but brushing against them turned out to be part of the point. Marlene let the breath of God pass from her lips. She seemed a little dizzy, and the region that was clamped became enlarged. It must have hurt like shit, Toni told me, *because those things were on there pretty well and she was grinding up against me and they were getting caught in my hair or I was pushing them aside and she was just moaning in that way people do, moaning like this was the straight vanilla thing*. This went on for a while and finished with Marlene producing a formidable strap-on dildo from a Doc Martens shoe box under the bed. Marlene reached and shoved the box back under the bed. A ripple of pain seemed to overtake her as she did so, and she huffed once with it, as though this were a brisk sort of exercise.

Marlene arranged the dildo harness *over* her clamps, organizing these hazards disinterestedly. They might as well have been curlers. She stood. She stepped out of the leather chaps and into the black lycra harness with a real weariness. A couple of clothespins sprung loose and she let them go. Then she guided the dildo through the hole in the harness. Its pinkish, Caucasian color was ridiculous. She had a large bottle of Astroglide already waiting on the floor beside the bed, and she told Doris to lean over and grab it, and then, while Toni was doing busy work on her breasts, fingerpainting them, she lubricated her lover's ass and vagina both, as though she were baby-oiling an infant—with just this detachment—and bid Doris kneel at the edge of the bed. Marlene, standing,

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fucked Doris in the ass, while Toni got around the side and fondled Doris's clitoris. Toni was doing the same to herself. *It was like jazz-dancing*, Toni told me, *it was all these moves and steps like that bitch in Montclair, Mrs. Beatty, tried to ram into my head when I was in Jazzercise on Mondays and Wednesdays when Mom was doing the day-care center thing*. But the fact was: Toni liked it. It was thrilling the way the last reel of a film is thrilling. You just want to see it all played out.

Doris on the other hand seemed to be walking through it a little bit. *Penetration, you know, isn't always the coolest thing among women*, Toni said. Doris held clumps of Toni's cinnamon hair in her hands as she, Doris, was being fucked by Marlene. She gently tousled Toni's hair, mumbling slightly, with a kind of sexual agitation that had a little sadness in it too. The amazing thing, though, was that Marlene was getting the whole dildo up into Doris, *grinding up into her with those fucking clamps and clothespins all over her!* Finally, though, Doris seemed to have enough of it, and she pulled the facsimile out of her ass with a sigh, reaching behind her, looking behind her in this vulnerable way and then pulling the thing out of her, she stood and pushed Marlene down on the bed, masturbating the rubber dick attached to Marlene, as though it could feel, pulling the condom off it, yes condom, and jerking it off, grinding against her lover's hips until Marlene seemed to be in some thrall of shuddering and pain, kissing Doris on the mouth, reaching up to gently kiss her goodnight. *Oh God*, Marlene said, as Doris knelt to remove the clamps one by one, first the nipple clamps, and the skin underneath was bruised with red rings around it. Even on Marlene's dark skin you could see the welts rising. And then the clothespins from her labia. Marlene fingered the damage in an inebriate swoon. *Oh God*. Toni and Doris stood around her, around the foot of the bed. Marlene probed with her long dark stalks for the evidence of the clothespins. Then she lay back on the bed. Rolled away on her side. Doris wiped her hands on the comforter at the foot of the bed, almost as if that simulated thing,

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the simulated dick, had ejaculated onto her, as if she'd had Marlene's very semen upon her.

And then she turned her attentions to Toni. She said something that Toni didn't hear, the two of them angling around one another like wrestlers now, angling as if to grasp one another, and then the words became clear, their quaintness, Doris wanted to be held, *really*, Toni told me. *Believe it or not, she just wanted to be held*, so the two of them were hugging, and Toni really felt like she was Doris's dad or something, holding her, and then this paternal kindness or whatever it was gave way to another set of roles, another set of styles. They were lying on the bed next to Marlene who was in some narcotic semi-consciousness, and they were facing one another head to foot, going down on each other, because the just holding each other part was okay, but it led elsewhere right then. They were unclothed now, the pile of fantasy gear sitting atop their street clothes like an upper layer of sediment. Doris tasted musty to Toni, as though forgotten in all the rush to arrange things, and Toni felt badly for her. So pity became a component in this secondary tangle of erotics. Pity in there too, like yet another partner, an unwanted partner. Toni's first and only instance of transportation that evening was a little ripple, really, and she made more noise with it than it required. She faked it. *By then, there really wasn't anything going on that was doing it for me, so I faked it*, she told me. Doris in the meantime was having the revelation of the shy. All the contentment in the world seemed to come out of some locked basement and crowd around her. There was sentiment everywhere; the world was her damp handkerchief, her multi-volume diary. It was the kind of orgasm, to Toni, that was promised by the good-natured phonies who wrote sex manuals. *Loving as Lesbians* (*By and For and How To*). Or, *The Gay Woman: A Manual for Lovers and Friends*. Come out of your cellar cabinets of shame, *womyn*, and *celebrate*! Know the community of love!

—Wow, Doris said, Oh God. Wow. Oh.

—Mm, Toni said.

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Now they lay beside one another in the light of a single bedside lamp.

—Don't worry about her, Doris said. Out cold. Once she's out you could jump on the mattress and she wouldn't notice.

Toni smiled nervously.

—You want to spend the night?

—Can we all fit on here?

They could, sure, though Toni wasn't totally convinced she wanted to spend the night. She was kind of hoping they couldn't all fit. She kind of wanted to go back to her own bed and sort through the fleeting recollections of the evening: dancing in the cage, putting on the bondage gear, fitting a clamp onto another woman's nipple, the exponential complications of a threesome. She felt overtaxed, like she'd sat through a double feature in the front row. She was cranky, short-tempered. It didn't make any difference. Toni was worried about hurting Doris's feelings for some reason, for some stupid girl reason. So she stayed. Soon all three women were arranged in the enormous bed. Marlene's lungs wheezed like an old bellows. Doris, on the other hand, was a light sleeper. Toni was between the two of them and she couldn't get comfortable all night—the gravitational yank of those bodies was too much for her. And Doris kept throwing a leg over her, pinning her, as though Toni were there for good.

A diner on Ninth Avenue. After a silent and hungover breakfast, the three of them made another date for the Thursday following. *Would you want to come visit us again?* Marlene said. And Marlene did indeed seem to want to try it again. But there was another part of her—Toni told me over the weekend, when she and I went to a bar on First Avenue called simply *Bar*—there was another part of Marlene that was suspicious somehow, evidently suspicious, that the two of them, Toni and Doris, had been *fucking around without her*. Taking advantage of her intermittent consciousness. She must have had some infrared surveillance device, Toni thought, some unconscious sensor watching out for her interests. Or else she

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was just keenly attuned to the inevitability of heartache. *Rejection sensitivity*. So what if Doris and Toni *were* doing it? It was part of the problem of three people. *You really gotta trust each other*, Toni told me. *Cause there's always two on and one off*. But Marlene couldn't withstand the implications, and as the thought took root, it sent forth these poisonous boughs.

That was no surprise. The picture of Marlene got worse as Toni learned about it. Marlene flew into a rage if the place, if the apartment in Clinton, was not swept clean; if the dog, Bernice Neptcong (a male) had not been walked; if the pictures were crooked, if Doris happened to show any interest, conversational or otherwise, in any male who didn't wear dresses and have breasts; if, for even a moment, Marlene had the sensation that Doris was preoccupied with another woman. Or sometimes Marlene flew into a rage just out of fatigue, just out of daily confusion. And when Marlene flew into a rage, *she sometimes beat Doris*. This is what Toni found out before the second date ever took place, when she met Doris for a drink, because Doris called her at work and said, *I have to talk to you. Let's meet at this bar on St. Mark's. It's important*. Her voice was hushed as if even the security on her work phone had somehow been breached.

This fact of battery seemed to slip almost casually from Doris and Marlene to Toni and Doris and then to Toni and me, the enormity of it almost routine or incidental at first, as if it were not about people at all, as if there were not bruises on Doris's china features, as if it were about a way that people lived in New York City, an awful way that people lived in New York City, where women beat their children in public, and men beat one another on the subways. Toni told me and I said nothing, because this beating was a vacuum, a lifelessness that I couldn't really adjust to at first, and then I passed it on, passed on that silence to someone else, who in turn passed it on, the idea that good people, principled women, occasionally beat one another out of confusion and sadness and loss and thereby put the purple, the hematoma, in the flag that hung over city hall.

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Bruises had appeared all over Doris. She frequently wore sunglasses. She spoke of falling down stairs and walking into doors. It was getting difficult at the office, as it had been difficult at offices in the past. *I've been fired from jobs before*, Doris said, her hands trembling as she lit a cigarette. Her voice was dull and methodical; she smelled clean, obsessively clean, to Toni; her skin was the palest white, the color of gallery walls.

—I can't lose another job because of her. I'm not functioning as it is. You know? It's getting embarrassing. I'm tired of going through it . . . It's humiliating and it's really tiring too. I'm tired of living like this. There's this dull way things go around and around again and I'm almost thirty-two years old and I don't want to live like this anymore.

Doris would veer off in another direction, onto another subject, and then she would come back to it. And then another refrain emerged. *She asked Toni if she knew anywhere they could cop some cocaine*. They were drinking and having the conversation that veered from the tragic to the mundane, from battery to discussions of rock-and-roll bands, and then suddenly Doris was trying to procure. No delicate way to announce it, like there was no delicate way to say that you have been beaten by your lover and that you haven't exactly done anything about it yet. Doris said, *Do you know where we could pick up*? And since Toni lived in the East Village she did know where to buy drugs, though she was no regular customer, she knew where, because you passed it every day. Wasn't terribly complicated. So they walked down Twelfth Street and copped some rock from the first cluster of dangerous looking boys they saw. That simple. The boys took their twenty dollars and came back a little later with the vials, the vials with their little red plastic caps. Doris and Toni smoked it together in a basement stairwell.

Then the complaints were spilling from Doris's mouth in long, artificial strings. How had she assumed this role, this victim role? What king of mystery was there in her *family of origin*? Where could blame be settled so that her burden would

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be lighter? She was victimized by Marlene. Marlene pulled all the strings. She was thinking back to her parents' *concept of child-rearing and its hidden language of coercion*. Doris was powerless. She needed to *share her truth*. To set *boundaries*. The passions of battery were stirred way down in the unconscious, in the history of the species, not up where Doris or anyone could control them. She didn't know if she could shake it. She wanted to leave but she didn't know if she could. There was something operatic about Doris not walking the dog and then getting hit. There were all kinds of hatred between Doris and Marlene. Marlene was systematically trying to *murder* Doris. Doris had actually woke to find Marlene holding a pillow over her head as she slept, she had found Marlene tampering with jars of prescription medication that she had in a cabinet—*I have these attacks of nerves*, Doris said. Marlene couldn't handle, in the end, that Doris's family had money and that hers did not, the differences between the classes were too much for her, though Doris herself felt she understood the misery that Marlene had come from. She could see how Marlene's childhood in the city was just a long story of deprivation. She could see how her life had been devoid of any model for affection. *But she didn't have to murder her for it*. She didn't have to buy a gun, which was what Marlene was talking about doing, ostensibly to defend them from the fucking creeps in Hell's Kitchen, *fucking creeps*. And then just as suddenly, Doris was in love again. She had not exhausted all of her love for Marlene. Marlene was radiant when she was happy, she had a smile that would stop at nothing. When she was happy, her face seemed to open and to reply *yes* to everything, to the abandoned buildings, to the crack dealers, to the repulsive men who paid her. Her face said *yes*, and it was clear how revolutionary and dangerous was the *yes* of a woman who was *grabbing the world by its dick and yanking*. Marlene happy, Doris said, was as dangerous as a souped up automatic weapon. But then on the other hand she was dangerous when she wasn't happy and that was where all the trouble started. Marlene was dangerous. She was just thinking out

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loud. Marlene was dangerous. (Toni was telling me in the bar.) And that was when Doris began to think about what she might do about the problem. There was no longer any way around it.

They went to Wendy's together, the next Saturday. All three of them. For a minute, everything seemed to be going all right. There was a new room where a woman in thigh-high boots and black leather gloves was throwing darts. There was another auction, and the three of them discussed buying a fourth woman. They were particularly fond of a little girl in a white party dress who shivered and grimaced like a child abandoned in a department store. This little girl would have waited among the men's shirts for weeks for the mother who would never return.

But they didn't have enough cash between them really to pay for the girl, who was a hot item. Top dollar for this girl. They were back at the Clinton apartment; it was only 12:30. The dog was walked, the apartment was clean. The three of them were there in the apartment, and already the process of unclothing themselves seemed ritualized. Something had gone out of it. Toni knew she was just chasing kicks, and it didn't make her feel that good. Marlene seemed intent on being the passive recipient of whatever fucking was going to take place that night. She had a tableau in mind; it was theatrical. She was actively arranging for her passivity. Through some superhuman effort, Doris managed to keep the whole thing together for a time. She strapped on the pink dildo and fucked Marlene in the missionary position, but both of them seemed sad and distant, and Toni lay around drinking beer and lending a hand now and then. The air was hot and still. The heat was a malevolent force in the apartment. By the time they climbed under a lone sheet, the three of them were covered in the sweat of exertion and also the sweat of connections not entirely made. They were each a little drunk.

When Toni awoke, the sun was muffled in humidity. They had coffee, and she wondered if Doris was imagining the whole

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thing. New York City was quiet, it was Sunday morning, people were absorbed with that newspaper, and no ill feeling would spill onto the streets of the city until noon. Vice was canceled for a time out of respect for a few regular churchgoers. When Toni went home, when she called me later to go for a drink, she had a feeling this auction vogue had run its course now. She could go on to other things. *Sex just isn't that important*, she said. *You can get into it for a while and then you can get into something else*. She was thinking about maybe going back out to Long Island for the summer.

But that night Doris called again. She had to see Toni right away. Right away. She was a mess. *I've broken my wrist*, she said. *My wrist is in a sling*. Doris couldn't go to work the next day, looking like one of those women who, in dark sunglasses, stands by her man, who limps slightly and walks very slowly. Her wrist in a sling. Something about the night before. Marlene had just flipped out. She was coming at Doris with a lamp, one of those halogen lamps. She was going to break a fucking halogen lamp over Doris's head. They had been kissing while she slept, Marlene cried, Doris and Toni had been fucking without her. *And we hadn't!* Doris said, as if Toni needed to be conscripted into her version of the story. *And I told her that!* And Marlene started bringing up crazy stuff. Stuff that happened months ago. Why was Doris leaving early for the office on a Tuesday in March? If she actually went to the gynecologist in April did she have any proof? Marlene was bringing up things that never happened, totally imagining things. So Doris did what she had never done before. *She took a swing at Marlene*. Hit her in the arm and broke her own wrist. Just like that. Broke it like it was the tiny limb on a sapling. Marlene didn't have anything more than a bruise, but Doris's arm was broken and now Marlene wasn't talking to her anymore. Marlene was shattering furniture in the apartment. Marlene was silent and implacable and breaking things. Oh it was horrible, it was horrible, New York was horrible, and life was horrible, full of compromises—she was crying now—and other people controlled you, people you would

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never know, never even know their middle names or what their vices were, the stuff they never told you, the real pornography of sensitivity, the pornography of love and affection, the pornography of plain old bliss . . . You never knew anything and you passed into old age knowing nothing except the color of some *fucking bathtub toy from your childhood. Let's go get high*, Doris said. *I want to get high. I just want to get high.*

Doris made this plan. She told Toni. Their anniversary was coming up. She and Marlene had been together two years. She would make a plan to spend the day with Marlene. It involved taking Marlene to see a play. The theater. *Shakespeare in the Park*. Yep. In New York you could work your way past the homeless people in midtown and the homeless guys sleeping in the park and the guys who were auctioning off their tragedies, their TB, their KS, their HIV, their veteran status, for alms, and you could go see these plays in the park. *Shakespeare in the Park*. Anyone could go. And though Marlene had little formal education, Shakespeare moved her—all those old tragedies with their sins of pride and their purgations. She especially liked strong women characters. Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra. So they were seeing *Lear* and Doris knew she was a Reagan or Goneril; sharper than serpent's teeth, Toni told me, because at that very moment the other part of the plan was taking effect. Because Doris was leaving. Doris was leaving. Doris was springing it on Marlene. And Toni was agreeing. Out of pity.

So Toni and a team of illegal aliens broke into Doris's and Marlene's apartment, fed the dog, Bernice Neptcong, with fresh steak, actually feeding the dog steak like in some PG-13 heist movie, because the dog, raised by Marlene, would fasten its jaws onto any intruder, and they didn't want to have to kill it, and while the dog was eating the steak, a fine cut, I would imagine, lean, lean, lean, Toni was directing this team of illegal aliens who had no real interest in the haste or deceit involved in their work because they just needed the work; Toni was directing them to what she believed was Doris's furni-

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ture and CDs and books and sexually explicit videos and pictures of Monet's years at Giverny and was putting them into an unmarked, rented van that was double-parked in front of the Korean deli below. It was too bad that it had to be on their anniversary, Toni told me, but Doris couldn't think of another way to shake her, another day, another perfect time and place. Or maybe the cruelty that was involved in this plan was very much on Doris's mind, for the two years of cruelty she had received, and this was the best way to work it out, the most perfect way to make her point, a point thematically coherent and consistent, like a play itself, a point with the coincidences and destinies of a play.

I guess I have to admit here, too, that as a friend of Toni's I served as an accomplice to this crime. I served as a lookout, just in case Marlene or one of her friends (though she didn't have many friends) might have some synergistic understanding of what was going on, some sudden impulsive need to go see if Bernice Neptcong, M.D., had enough water in all this heat. Shamefully, I stood on the street as the Hispanic guys, their faces twisted into the solemn, sensitive gazes of funeral parlor employees, carried the furniture out of the apartment at a trot.

Finally, there was an intermission at *Lear*, between the third and fourth acts and Doris told Marlene, giving her an affectionate little peck on the cheek, that she had to go to the bathroom. Doris's lips were not thin lips, as I might have imagined, the lips of preppy women from Bernardsville. No, through some strange genetic twist, she had been given the broad, full lips of a lover, and even at the beginning Marlene had adored these lips, Toni believed, had adored kissing Doris. So Doris's lips were now descending on Marlene's razor cheeks, and Marlene, as a matter of course, was pretending not to care entirely, though inside perhaps, where things were all tangled up, there was some interior paroxysm of joy or gladness at the bounty of love, though this paroxysm was smothered by the cool of New York. Then Doris gave her a little hug. She was wearing a black tank top and black jeans, and Marlene

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was, too. Marlene was wearing almost the same thing, and Doris gave her a little squeeze, and said she had to go to the *comfort station*. She laughed and said it, *comfort station*.

And then she took off. She was sobbing like a baby, sobbing like that girl left in the department store, sobbing in a way that can't be ameliorated by the stuff in this world, no matter how much good happens. But by the time she met another friend, Debby, over by *Tavern on the Green*, by the time she met Debby she had settled down a little bit. Debby had borrowed a car, a black Toyota Celica with plastic wrap in the rear windows from where they had been shattered, and they were driving straight to Newark airport, where Doris was catching a flight to New Orleans to stay with some cousins for a couple of weeks.

Elsewhere, with crack timing, the illegal aliens and Toni were driving Doris's stuff to mini-storage over in the west teens, just above the meat-packing district.

Marlene in the meantime was sitting on the blanket under the trees. Just a regular old blanket from the apartment, nothing special. And she was eating a cheap piece of cheddar cheese on a Triscuit and watching the edges of the audience fray as people came and went, and thinking what a great breeze, what a killer breeze and then wondering, when the play had begun again, where Doris was, but just wondering briefly, not giving it that much thought, and then watching some of the play and getting concerned, packing things up as if she was going to leave, wondering if leaving was the right thing to do, if staying put was maybe better, because if Doris was lost—as she was often lost, a little absentminded—it would be better if one of them weren't moving and then getting pissed off, really pissed off, *fuck*, and getting up and blocking somebody's fucking view of *RAIN RAIN RAIN* or some such passage and sitting back down and then getting worried because the rage that Marlene felt was in part worry, rage blanketing worry based on experience, some experience of loss, and so she was getting up and walking fast, now, purposefully, in a way you might have found scary if you were watching her, walking fast

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toward the Portosans, or whatever brand they had installed over on the other side of the field where everyone was sitting, and looking at the line of people there, unable to ask any of the women there, the overdressed women, the society chicks who had read *Shakespeare in college*, if they had seen a woman in black jeans, suddenly unable to do it somehow, unable to do it, shy or something, and then wandering around the Portosans, in the woods, the woods of Central goddamn Park, wandering, past Tavern on the Green and back to the play, hearing applause, not paying any attention to it, seeing a dozen women who looked like Doris, looked exactly like her until you got up close, until you could see up close that they had one birthmark that Doris didn't have, or they held one opinion that was not Doris's, or that they were fucking boys instead of girls, although otherwise they *were* Doris, seeing them and working upstream to the spot where she and Doris had sat and not finding her, in the dark now, getting dark, worried, concerned, enraged, yeah, murderously enraged, worried, Doris's headless, raped body in the Ramble, raped by some fucking pervert, worried, and then walking out of the park, empty now, followed by cops on horses, not cops that you would ask to help you, though, they were no help, cops, gangsters attached at the waist to horses, so worried, walking back toward the apartment down Eighth Avenue, down through the sleaze, down Eighth Avenue, walking automatically, not thinking at all, not feeling, just thinking the worst, but in a disembodied way, permitting the worst just to swim in her wherever it would—Doris's headless body. Doris's headless body, her jeans and her breasts and then no head, just bones and tubing and pink gelatinous stuff, and then turning up the street and fitting the key in the lock that was broken anyway, and checking the mail just because *Doris liked to get mail*, checking the mail just for Doris, and climbing up the poorly lit and warped steps to the third floor and fitting the key in the door, not knowing right then how time was stretching out in this moment, not knowing how long it was taking to turn that key because she was imagining the worst

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but in a detached way, in a way while she was planning to go to Wendy's that night, or in a way while she was thinking about her job and almost crying with how much she hated it and how the guys thought they could just do anything . . . and regretting all the trouble with Doris, regretting it and not being able to explain it, not even being able to admit it exactly, imagining trouble but not seeing the real trouble that lay right in front her. And then turning the handle and seeing the blankness, the emptiness in that space.

The apartment was just about cleaned out.

Doris on her way to New Orleans: she was having a drink on the plane. And then she was in the Big Easy. The second day there she went to Mobile. To the Gulf Coast. The sun was high, and it was humid and the water was a fabulous blue. It was nothing like New York City. When you were in Mobile, New York City just didn't exist at all. It was somebody's fever dream. And then she called Toni that night, because she hadn't left Toni the number, knowing that Marlene would call Toni wanting to know if she was a part of it, if she was responsible for it, wanting the number, wanting revenge, and sure enough Toni said she had called weeping, hysterical, *How could you do this to me how could you do this to me how could you do this to me how could any human being do this to another human being?* but Toni had the machine on and had gone to stay with Debby who also had her machine screening. Marlene's hoarse, throaty screams. Beyond the frequency that telecommunications could handle. Marlene's shrill recognitions drifting out over New York.

Actually, by the time Doris was in Mobile, Marlene was already dead. Doris was on the plane when it happened. The exact moment was lost to her; she felt no shiver of symbiosis. She felt no paranormal sadness. She was over Tuscaloosa. Or she was at the baggage check when Marlene hanged herself. All of this is fucking *true*, I can tell you that. Marlene hanged herself. Doris abandoned her girlfriend at a performance of Shakespeare in the Park and then flew to New Orleans—and this is what Marlene did afterwards. She hanged herself with

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rope she got at a hardware store right next to the Best Western on Eighth Avenue. She left a crumpled twenty on the counter. The guy in the store didn't even notice when she overlooked her change. When Marlene did it she was alone, and she wasn't discussing it with anyone. She had to make sure the bar in the closet was sturdy enough. She would have to really make her mind up once and for all, because it was pretty low, that bar and hanging yourself in there would take a lot of work. Marlene left no note, as Doris had left no note explaining her own disappearance. She used the handcuffs in their apartment, which once had bound her and Doris together while they made love, to cuff herself behind the back, and another set on her ankles. She put the ankle cuffs on first, then the handcuffs, and then she put her head through a slipknot. A regular old slipknot. And then she threw herself off balance and gasped as she fell over, stumbling to her side, kicking around the boots on the floor of the half-empty closet, kicking over boots and bondage gear and the other stuff Doris had left her, wanting to get up again, but all tangled and having trouble getting up, desperate to get up now, weeping, but not getting up. The energy to do so dissipated. Shocked in the last second, terrified, and then resigned, powerless. Her last breath spread in an even film in the still air of the apartment. She settled down to room temperature.

The closet door was open. The dog paid no attention. He had been fondled and loved that afternoon by Toni and the guys from Ecuador. He'd eaten steak. But then when Marlene was dead Bernice Neptcong, the dog, became somehow uncomfortable. He went and sniffed at the long dark legs half-folded awkwardly under Marlene. And then he curled up by one ankle for the long wait. When they found her days later, when the neighbors complained, Bernice was shivering and hungry, but he struck out blindly nonetheless at the super, the police—these interlopers in the drama of neglect—baring his teeth, protecting the lost lives that had prized him. This was his kingdom now.

Three weeks later Doris was walking down Eighth Street

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late at night. The streets were empty. She was on her way to Avenue D. Ten days back in the city. She had tried to get in touch with Toni, but it wasn't turning out exactly as she'd hoped. She hoped that Toni would be around when she got back. In New Orleans the unspeakable drama of her predicament created a space between her and her cousins. She found this space again in Princeton. She was more alone than ever before, though she had fled from Marlene to escape loneliness, though she had opposed loneliness with what strength she had. Death mocked all this stuff. These weeks made clear the overpressure of fate. She'd taken too much time off from her job. She didn't really have anywhere to stay. She certainly wasn't going back to the apartment. And Toni wouldn't see her. So she had come to this address in the East Village. She had come by herself, feeling nauseated and lost, for the dull thrill of carelessness.

In the bakery on Eighth and D, Doris waited in line like everyone else. The woman in front of her actually bought some bread to go with her heroin—it was a demonstration loaf of stale Italian—but Doris wasn't here for bread. She was here for a dime bag. In front of her in line was Jorge Ruiz. His clothes were shabby. Throughout his transaction, he never once raised his eyes. Neither did Doris. She wouldn't have recognized him anyway; she wouldn't have known how close their lives were; she wouldn't have seen anything, lost in the flow of her own disgrace.

III

Randy Evans didn't know that the girl on Ninth Street had been directing a film for two years. That girl, Yvonne. He thought she just sold hash. She was small and pale. She had sloppily dyed platinum blond hair. Roots showing. She was spending money on what? On leather miniskirts and stuff and on hash when she was supposed to be selling the hash instead of smoking it, selling it in order to finance a film she was

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making. He found this out later. Yvonne was going to be his wife, although he wasn't quite sure when or how yet. She didn't know anything about it. And he didn't know it at first either, on Ninth Street, when they met. In front of a store that sold Populuxe lamps and plastic handbags and photos of Marilyn and Elvis. He didn't know it until he ran into her a few times at clubs in the neighborhood, most of them gone now. At 8BC or Pyramid. He didn't know until a sort of pattern was established. A pattern of chance encounters.

He clubbed and so did she. Although he liked *nice* clubs—Interferon or Area—where the cash dwelt, cash and speedballs and stuff like that, he also slouched around in twilit venues like the Crypt and the Manhole and the Ruin. He was flashy, he liked to throw a little money around, but late at night he found himself watching guys getting flogged at the Ruin. He was making some good money working up in the garment district, had his own showroom for a while, in fact. The Evans Line. Borrowed some money from some garment industry backers and started this showroom which was a little cut rate, priced to move pretty well, and he was hoping to get some of it into department stores. At first he was. He was getting it into some places. Alexander's and Gimbel's.

Then at night he bought cocaine and he went to Area. And some time later in the evening when he was teetering between drunkenness and mania he went to the Ruin. There he watched the sleepwalkers, in the oblivion of the masochist's craft, with their dicks in their hands, circulating around the room, or around the stage where a guy with a ponytail was getting whipped on the ass by a dominatrix. This man must have hung up there for half an hour. When he was released from his torture, he was covered with welts. Black and blue all over his ass. And the guy just smiled. Randy liked it. He liked to watch the sleepwalkers as they inclined, lips pursed, toward the toes of women lounging at the bar. They'd wander around sleepily jerking off and then they'd ask a woman if they could suck her toes. He laughed at all this stuff. He'd stay at the Ruin sometimes until dawn.

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Anyway, he met Yvonne at 8BC. He didn't tell her about his late night exploits. She didn't tell him about her film. In fact, Randy's interest in *B&D* was something that he disavowed generally. It occupied a corner of his life that he did not dwell upon. He was sometimes afraid of who he might meet at the Ruin. His night life was only partly under his control. But that night he was at 8BC. There was this band playing. They had no name. The only way you knew if they were playing was if one of the clubs left a conspicuous absence on their calendar. Or there would be a listing, *Closed for Private Party*. That was how people referred to them sometimes. They said, Oh, I'm going to see *Closed for Private Party*. Randy was at 8BC with his friend Noel. Noel from England. They went to Pyramid. Or was it somewhere else? Who could remember? And then they came back, and when they walked into 8BC it was like something had changed in Randy's life. There had been some subtle movement of chance and suddenly the whole topography of his life was different. Or that's how it felt. *Holy shit*, he said to Noel. *Holy shit, who is that woman across the room, and how could I have missed her the first time*? She was standing under this neon fixture, and it turned out he had met her once before. Yvonne. In torn black leggings and blond hair and a black crucifix and a black brassiere with a black sweater halfway unbuttoned.

To Noel he said: *Think I will have to use that line about how I have met her somewhere before. It only works if you really have.*

Because he had met her on the street that time. And he invited her to do a line with him, and she agreed even though she hated Eurotrash and would-be Eurotrash guys. American guys who thought that everything was okay if they just flashed a little green. American guys with platinum cards. American guys too stupid to know that Europe had nothing to offer now but Swiss watches and deconstruction. American guys who actually invited in these colonialists with their dead cultures. *She must have wanted the drugs*, Randy told Noel later. *I don't care how the job gets done as long as it's done*. But the

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truth was Yvonne was just collecting material for her film. Everything was material, the dullest moments, the most ornate fancies. After Yvonne and Randy did the lines in the men's room they left behind Yvonne's friend Debby and Noel.

In the neon shadows in the back of the club Yvonne cheerfully admitted to Randy that she dealt hash. Which he knew already by hearsay. She produced a pipe. They smoked some of her product. It was old-fashioned and quaint. The conversation was lurching along; there was neither agreement nor discord. And then they slipped out the back door into an alley. Somewhere along the line the hash hit, they were laughing, giggling, totally stoned. Laughing about something—he couldn't even remember. Wait: laughing about Eurotrash and Ecstasy and House and Japanese people invading the East Village and buying all the real estate out from under the slumlords and about the tanks in Tompkins Square Park. Just laughing. He hadn't had such a good time in a while. So they ditched Noel and Debby altogether, at 8BC or Pyramid or wherever it was, and went to her apartment, right near his on Ninth Street. It was all coming back to him now. He had met her a couple of times before. It was the greatest thing. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever met in his entire life. She was going to be his wife. He would have a wife *and* a private life. Yvonne was hard to talk to—she missed all the ease in a conversation—but she was beautiful. They stayed up and did some more cocaine and watched the sunrise on the roof and he didn't lay a glove on her and they went to a coffee shop on First Avenue. He poured black coffee over the ground stubs that had been his teeth the night before. They smarted. He was tired as shit. He was giddy.

Later that week, he was back at the Ruin, watching an old fat guy lean into the bullwhip as this woman named *Huck* really let him have it. The fat guy had a lifeless, undersea expression on his face, and no kind of erection that Randy could see. It was hard to tell whether pleasure was involved for this guy or not. And then he got the itch to see Yvonne again. There were a few other women on the roster, but he

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moved them around a little bit. He didn't know why they were suddenly of less interest, these other women, but he wasn't worrying about it. He was just improvising. His mind was on the Evans clothing line and on hitting the clubs. He didn't think too much about other stuff. He called Yvonne's number at the Ninth Street place. She was probably working some gallery job during the day or at some non-profit theater company. She probably had jeans with paint stains on them. He realized *he didn't even know what she did during the day*. He wondered if dealing hash was her principal line of business. How did she organize her clients? Did she keep a file on computer? What kind of overhead was there in an enterprise like that?

Then she got pregnant. There's a gap in the story here that doesn't concern me, a gap with its conventional romantic navigations of approach and retreat. The fact is that a month or two later Yvonne found she was pregnant. This was about as stupid as anything Randy had ever done. They had slept together, of course; they had been sleeping together off and on for two or three months. They had fucked without a diaphragm or a rubber or anything, and they had done it a number of times, on a number of occasions, maybe even too many times to remember. And they hadn't thought about it too much because they had just come from some bar or club. She said, *I will not take the fucking pill*, and who could blame her? She smoked several packs of cigarettes a day. She had one of those lavender packets of birth-control pills on her bedside table but it was neglected. They had used condoms, but he didn't like them—*worse than a wet suit*—and then she had become pregnant.

She didn't seem concerned with her pregnancy either. She had been selling hash in order to make a movie about the East Village, about the people in the East Village and the coincidences that overtook you in a place like the East Village. You could miss someone by seconds, you could turn a corner and this incredibly pertinent information would be lost be-

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cause the person you were about to pass, whom you did not see (because in Manhattan you always looked at your feet), was now lost to you. In this film, Yvonne liked to say, *you could see how much larger the pool of potential facts is than the pool of facts that actually turn out to be true*. You could, in this film, turn a corner on St. Mark's Place and First Avenue, say, and just miss your ex-boyfriend's ex-girlfriend who was actually related to you in some way, who could tell you something about your ex-boyfriend that you never knew, who was going up First Avenue toward Fourteenth Street. You could just miss her. In this way there was much that you failed to know. You failed to know, for example, that a man who had once been important to you was now ill with that horrible kind of pneumonia. But you wouldn't know this, because you were walking the wrong direction. Or you wouldn't know because you had been ducking, for a week, the barely functioning answering machine in your barely furnished apartment.

The film, however, contained all these possible outcomes; the film that Randy still didn't know much about was being filmed on a *shoestring budget*, in various bars, with the cooperation of various bartenders. Yvonne would venture into these locations with a loaner camera—she was always charging it on the AC adapter back at her apartment—and shoot interviews, just little snippets, or false pieces of narrative material, late into the night, after closing, after everyone slunk off to the after-hours joints. She had no idea how any of this material was going together. She had a naive optimism that she would figure it out eventually, and that it didn't matter that the neighborhood was changing around her and that her film now represented an East Village that was no longer located in this spot. And all the money from the hash and the waitressing was supposed to pay for this film that was subordinate to everything else in her life, for processing time on the Steenbeck, for the transfer from video back to film, for the sound edit, but she was smoking the hash and borrowing money to pay back the guy who sold the drugs to her in the first place.

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And now she was pregnant. She told Randy over the phone, and they had their first big fight. He was from a good family from Atlanta, this decorous family with whom he was not really in touch anymore, and he thought having a decorous family of his own wasn't such a bad idea. He could see that there was a convenient aspect to this calamity. Now he had an argument for marriage and family. They could just fall into it. So he went over to her place to break this news to her. To break the news that he was ready, at twenty-four, for domesticity.

They slept together first. They slept together before talking, and it was really, really sexy, the way he saw it. It was like the first time. He took off her skirt slowly. He liked to see how slowly it was possible to make love. He kissed her so slowly you didn't even know his lips were moving. How slowly? His movements were in increments smaller than millimeters. *The band with no name* was playing on the old, beat-up tape player, and the video camera was standing on a tripod, pointing out the window, and he was proceeding across her lips as slowly as possible. It could take hours before he would creep down along her neck, after pausing to dig an incisor into her earlobe, after pausing to suck on her tongue. Hours before he was aimlessly encircling her breasts with his fingertips. And then further down. He liked every second of it. He even liked unlacing her Doc Martens. Nakedness was never so naked. And then he touched her stomach. Women had gotten pregnant because of his irresponsibility before, once in boarding school, once after a weekend by the shore in Mobile, but he had been young then. This was his first time as an adult. The fact of it, the fact of fertility, was enormous and perfect like the shape of a particularly dangerous storm.

Her belly was small and trim. She didn't eat too well. *Just eat to avoid fainting*, she said. *Nothing more*. He traced his finger across her stomach as if he were painting cave paintings there, as if trying to render the moment of conception in some pictorial writing. As if trying to capture all the lives bound together in this notion of conception. What was so sexy about

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all this? What was hot about coming to the end of the profligate and wandering part of your life? What was sexy about suddenly wanting to accept responsibility? Maybe in part what was sexy was all the bad news, all the risk, all the difficulties. Maybe he wasn't thinking clearly about it at all. But maybe he was. Love was something that had the threat of bad news with it. Love was risk and obligation and caffeine addiction. Love was like watching the Tompkins Square riots on television. It was like hearing a guitar amp explode. It was like shooting coke for the first time. It was like watching the demolition of a tenement building and it was like remembering these pleasures years after they are gone.

And that was when she introduced the device.

—Hey, look, I have this thing I have to show you . . .

She reached over beside the bed where an ominous looking electrical kit was waiting.

—What the fuck is that?

The shame of being found out, of being located and then conscripted into the league of kinks, of being a guy who liked devices *and* wanted a family, this shame overcame him first. His resistance was first. He knew, in some atavistic part of his unconscious reserved for the pursuit of bodily woes disguised as pleasures, he knew what it was. He didn't know how it was going to work, but he recognized the control knobs on the box. They resembled the knobs that had driven the electric trains of neighbors in his boyhood. One of the dials was marked COURSE and the other ADJUSTMENT.

—This is an electrical stimulation box, she said. It's for the film. See? I'm getting interested in this idea that I can have like some sex club stuff in it. I could have, you know, couples using these marital aids. Like this one or Sybian or something. From Orgone Romance Systems of Las Vegas. These ones here are the *instant kill switches* and those are the *indicator lamps* to monitor the control of the voltage.

—That's—

—Uh huh, she said. It's for fucking.

And from a small cardbord box lying on its side on the

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faded and dirty Indian rug *she produced the combination vaginal plug and cock ring attachment*. The attachment was made of a sturdy and durable transparent plastic, and, like the finest Steuben sculptures with their hints of silver and gold sunken in the glass renderings, the wires in the attachment, those glorious conductors, were glimmering in the plug and the ring. Yvonne had batteries in the device—it was running on battery power—and she juiced it up with the knobs and held the probe by the end.

—How are you going to use this for the movie? he said. You're going to get friends to use this and—

—Just touch your finger to it quickly. It's on the lowest setting.

—What the *fuck*? *Where did you get this*?

—I borrowed it. I'm thinking we should—

—Oh no, Randy said. If you think I'm gonna let you electrocute me with that thing, so that you can . . .

She touched it herself. Touched an index finger to it. There was a velocity to the way she was avoiding *the question in the air*. He had come over to talk about her pregnancy, to talk about the future, to raise practical questions, but instead they were here with the electro-stimulator. There was a velocity, a speed and a direction, to her avoidance. She was using the device—that facsimile of the most potent Latin American political torture machines—to stray from *the implications of things*. And she wasn't foolish: she knew what she was doing. She touched the plug and he could hear its faint buzz, its melancholy hum. She held her finger there.

He took the thing from her and set it aside.

—Hey, Yvonne, Randy said. I got a more important question. That's why I came over here. I came over here to ask you something.

The plug snapped and fizzled on the edge of the Yvonne's comforter.

—I came over here to ask you to marry me. That's what I came to do, Yvonne. We could get around this *problem* in a way you're probably not thinking of. The baby, I mean. We could just get married.

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And he had the engagement ring, in his pocket, an antique silver band that had been in the family for a while. Impulsively, though, before taking the ring out of the tangle of khaki trousers on the floor, he took the cock ring from the electro-stimulator and *set it on her ring finger.*

She laughed. A nervous, high, piccolo laughter. He reached for the COURSE knob.

—No way, she said. I'm too young to get married. I'm not carrying your fucking little *junior* around for nine months and fucking up my body and my hormones so that you'll have a peg to hang your hat on or someone to take care of you when you get senile. I don't want to spend my life with anybody, I can't even think of what my life will be like next week. I can't even imagine that I'll *have* a life next week. *Forget it.* Honey. Forget it.

Randy got really angry. He turned the stimulator all the way up. She laughed again. He brushed the device off the bed. They started to shout. They actually threw some stuff, some books and lamps, what kind of relationship was this, and what was she going to do, let this bad luck drive the last bit of fun out of their relationship when it could make them closer, and didn't she want to share anything with him, didn't she want to know that even on the lowest day she wasn't alone, didn't she want to wither with someone around who loved her, didn't she want to file a joint tax return? But she wouldn't do it, wouldn't do it, wouldn't do it, and he couldn't believe that he had been so stupid that he thought this woman who sold hash and claimed she was some kind of filmmaker, that this woman was going to do this marriage-and-family thing with him, how could he be so stupid, and then they were fucking again and in the middle of these attentions some key of persuasion was turned in the lock and she was able to convince Randy that the electric stimulation device was an adventure, a gamble, a temporary shelter. In the penumbra of rejection he agreed to it. That was the decision that came first. In that penumbra, in the penumbra of late night, she had the tape player on and she had the *fine adjustment* on the stimulator

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control panel turned down as low as it would go and she had the video camera turned on, she had swiveled it on the tripod to take a closeup on Randy's face, and she put the cock ring around him now, though his cock was only halfway hard, and then she turned the knob up slowly. It was just like being drilled by the dentist at first, it was that sensation of wrong, of inappropriateness, and then there was a white alarm in his head as she turned it up and the sound of the capacitor inside dampening it and then the device scorched him like there were electro-magnetic teeth ripping into his dick and he tore the thing off with the urgency that one shoos away an ornery wasp that has already made its mark and he collapsed on her bed for a second to catch his breath, to let the shock disperse itself throughout him. It was as though he were joining his friends the sleepwalkers as they too were bent upon the rack, *the rack of reactivity*, desperate simply for sensation in a monochromatic and decontextualized city. Yeah, it was right that he be here in this way, with the Ruin only a couple of nights behind him, with his fascination for the sleepwalkers and the transvestites and the perfect toes of the women at the bars. And he waited for the voltage to fade in him, until its absence was a sort of pleasure a sort of relief, and then he noticed her arm around him over his back and her voice in his ear saying *okay*, *okay*, that's right it seemed she was agreeing suddenly, she was changing her mind, *okay*, *okay*, yes she really was, *okay*, and so marriage was an interim government between them, and you could say all this lifelong and ever after stuff, but if it didn't work they could throw in the towel. She loved him in this vulnerable tableau with the electro-stimulation box beside him. She loved him. They would work it out. The kid would work it out. They would have the kid and the kid would understand that she had other ambitions. The kid would figure it out. Kids were like superballs or something, like high concentration rubber objects. Kids could learn to adjust. *Okay*. She lit the pipe. She toked on it. She passed it to him. Now it was her turn. She handed him the vaginal plug and lay back against the pillows.

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Their marriage consisted of a civil ceremony on Staten Island, where the line at the courthouse was shorter. A friend of Yvonne's, Mike, filmed it, though none of the footage worked, really. It was nothing she could use, except for a brief shot of the justice of the peace straightening his tie.

Randy didn't tell his family. They would just have come up from the South. They would have hung around. Yvonne didn't tell her family, in Syracuse. She *forgot*. The two of them didn't really tell anyone, except Noel and Debby, who came to be witnesses. And Mike. There were all these coincidences on the way to the ceremony, people they met, people on the streets, people on the Staten Island ferry. New York seemed that day to be nothing but a system of low-probability coincidences. But then she had agreed to have the baby, too. Or at least she had agreed temporarily. Yvonne agreed to have the baby because she was tired and depressed, and she didn't want to think about it. Most days, she tried to renege on the decision. Some days she wanted to have it and then, after feeling sick, she vowed to abort. She should have gone for the abortion in the first month, when she was feeling especially bad, but somehow she didn't get around to it. This lack of decisiveness seemed to Randy to mask an excitement about the baby. Still, they were arguing so much about whether or not to go through with it. She hung on, looking for some kind of perfect advice from her friends or from her own mom—who thought she was out of her mind—or for some sign in the grid of order and disorder that was Manhattan. Walking the streets, turning the corners: *What should I do*? By then the baby was *close to quickening* as they said in British law. Somehow she didn't see how she could snuff it in the second trimester.

At the same time, though, she started getting a little further into particular kinds of East Village life, into the substance abuse parts of East Village life, started getting into them because she was nervous and scared and sad about how she had slid into all this, slid into some middle-class thing that she wasn't prepared for. It was all about this stupid film that was

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sitting in a metal box in her secondhand desk. There was the metal box and a bunch of old videocassettes. She *used to think* that it was all about the film. They were married. This had happened, although Yvonne couldn't figure out how it had happened. They lived pretty much the way they had lived before, except that they shared an apartment. Now he was always on top of her with his insecurities, with his practicalities, and Yvonne was really upset that she had never made the movie she had wanted to make, and she never had any time to herself, and she never *was* herself, and soon, on top of everything else, she was going to have a baby. She wasn't supposed to smoke or drink, but she sort of *was* smoking and drinking, anyway. And that wasn't all. Just a little bit really, just the occasional lapse in the area of harder drugs, for the really special occasions.

And instead of making more of the movie, instead of just going out and buying the film, which Randy might have contributed to, instead of finding someone to do the sound for her, she felt like she had to perfect the fifteen minutes of it she had. The continuity was all fucked up because it had been shot over the course of years, and some of the sound wasn't synchronized. Over and over she would do this opening, borrowing time from friends who were still editing or PA-ing instead of going to law school like you were supposed to do in your late twenties. It was really kind of good this first five minutes, if you were into a sort of totally random New York chaos. Full of jump cuts and repetition and shots of the microphone boom and a sequence with a dog hair on the lens. It doubled back on itself, this five minutes, this documentary, or whatever it was, though it was never going to be much of anything really. Two lives in it might mean different things at different times. They might be the same life, they might be twins. Toni, this woman, seemed to be straight in one scene and gay in another. People looked like one another, or like other people, and the structure of the film was going to be like the structure of New York. Laid out in a grid, except for the parts that weren't laid out in a grid, totally repetitious, except for the explosions of violence.

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Then she became obsessed about the soundtrack. She decided she had to secure the finest soundtrack composers possible for this film that was never going to be finished. It had to be *the band with no name*. She went to a party at the house of this music columnist for the *East Village Eye*—some neighborhood periodical—Jeanine Love. So they were at the party, which was on Avenue D, in a cramped apartment that had a porch with a great view of the Con Edison power plant on the East River. Yvonne, who had let Randy go out to some club, Pyramid or 8BC, to recreate the wild days of his bachelorhood, went up to this guy from *the band with no name*. He was from Massapequa, Long Island, and rock and roll had transformed him from a guy from Massapequa into a person with charm. Standing there in these rags and looking like his guitar had scorched him and he had been thereafter embalmed. He seemed not to have any emotions that she could discern. She told him, *I really like what you guys do and I think it's got a really experimental kind of thing . . . kind of feeling to it, and I think it would really be good for like a soundtrack or something, um, playing the guitar upside down and everything and well I'm making this movie about the East Village it's like an archeology of life in the East Village and I was wondering, I mean I was thinking maybe you would . . .*

The guy just grunted. He knew, as anyone looking at Yvonne would have suspected, that nothing was ever going to happen with this film. At the same time, she was preoccupied with the fact that his skin was an incredible blue color. He didn't say anything, made no commitment of any kind. But Yvonne understood that she was to follow him into the next room where the drummer from the band was tying off his arm with a handsome Velcro tourniquet so that he could pop a little bit of that grade-A Lower East Side dope underneath his baggy skin.

Jeanine Love, the hostess, was peripherally involved in the sex industry, in addition to being a music critic. She gave performances at the Ruin on occasion, and she wrote a little

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sexually explicit material, except that she didn't like writing it, so she hired ghost writers to write it for her. Because of her affiliation, however, on the floor and on the bed in the bedroom (where the guys from *the band with no name* were shooting heroin) there were cut-rate, rough-trade skin magazines piled everywhere. *Juggs* and *Cheeks* and titles of this sort. And while Yvonne was trying, politely, to discuss music with the guys in this band, they were flipping through the magazines and chuckling ominously. Then the guy from Massapequa, who had no expression whatever, who looked a lot like the boys that Randy was right then watching amble around the Ruin, was motioning to her. He was going to take care of her. She didn't know if she should do it. He would do it for her if she couldn't do it. In fact, there was no decision involved. Or it was a decision not to make a decision. It was a relaxing, an acceptance. It was caving in. Letting go.

—Really, I'm mostly into . . .

Then she let him do it.

And the light over the power plant on Avenue D like fucking celestial lights like the angels on the head of a needle and Randy was where? Who knew? She was puking in Jeanine Love's bathroom, and Jeanine was saying, *Come on you guys, come on, I'm really tired, I just don't want to stay up anymore. I don't want to* . . . And one of the guys from *the band with no name* was still there and he was going to leave Yvonne there because he was a little guy anyway and he wasn't going to carry her anywhere and he had to be up the next day for a Saturday shift at the copy shop where he worked. But then for some reason he was overcome by charity and soon he helped Randy's pregnant wife to a cab where he repeated the address she whispered to him to the cab driver. Kissing her on the lips and putting his finger to her lips—*don't tell*—and then repeating her address to the cabbie.

Then she miscarried.

The period of the marriage and pregnancy in which she was killing herself with dope would have been tougher if Randy

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hadn't been killing himself too. The movie was nowhere to be found now, it was in some dead-letter office somewhere, some imaginary film library of imaginary projects. What movie? There never was a movie. There was Randy and Yvonne going out to clubs, her in some kind of fashionable black maternity dress even though she wasn't really showing yet, but just because she liked the maternity look, some maternity dress that he'd gotten from a friend at another company. And there were no plates or sharps left in the house, because their arguments were too wild. And he was as strung out as she was sometimes. And he was pretty sure the books at his business were cooked, but he wasn't concentrating on it, exactly, he was going out with Yvonne and leaving her at home sometimes so that he could head out to the Crypt or the Ruin and watch the silent participants in the games there. He ground his teeth into a paste. And he was really into the electrostimulator, though she had become bored with it. When Randy did come home to their meager kitchen, he would find her already high, with that empty look in her eyes, eating a single carrot. Blasting some noise on the old, beat-up tape player. He had a bad feeling about it all.

—Don't you think you could lay off just until after the baby is born? Wouldn't that be a little safer?

—Huh?

—Wouldn't that be the polite thing to do? For the kid?

—I don't know what you're talking about, Yvonne said.

This period ended with her hysterical call. At work. On a Wednesday.

He told her to call 911 and he would meet her at the hospital but she was really scared. She was really really scared, he could hear how scared and so she asked him to come pick her up instead. *Please. It's a mess.* He made the emergency call himself and met her at the apartment before the ambulance arrived. Her skin the color of slate. There were trails, archipelagoes of blood in the bathroom, the mildewed bathroom, on the dirty towels. She was crying. Her hands were bloody, and he couldn't tell how much was from the miscarriage and how

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much was from needles. Abscesses. He knew. Right away he knew how bad it was. How lost the kid was. How lost she was. How bad it was.

—I was never supposed to have it anyway, she mumbled. Tracks of tears. I was never supposed to have it.

—Oh, shut up, he said. He hugged her and they waited. What was already obvious was then officially pronounced by the medical authorities.

The argument then spilled over into the deep part of several nights. It wasn't an argument about anything special now. It was an argument with *things in general*. Her breathing was so shallow he couldn't believe that oxygen ever grazed her bronchia. But her cells didn't need anything now but what dope could give them. All the same, he couldn't believe that lying came so easily to her. On the other hand, maybe she could lie without even noticing her lies. Maybe the possibility of truth was dormant within her now. And this is how she was after pregnancy, managing an ever increasing stream of lies. The current between the two of them dwindled under the burden of these lies.

—I'm not high, Yvonne said. I'm being really careful now, honey. I want to have a baby. *I want to make another baby*. Really, I'm telling you the truth.

He watched her sleep sometimes and he watched her puke in the morning and it was impossible to say whether it was from this miscarriage or from the drug. Or both. He cleaned up a little bit of her puke before going out to the office. He took a damp paper towel across the surface of the toilet seat.

And maybe she could have ridden the wave of her addiction through another childbirth. She didn't seem especially to care about pain anymore anyway. Her body was an obligation insofar as it played host to the brain and the brain's store of flattened affections and blunted nerves. Otherwise who cared? She was a brain in a vat. She was working on throwing off her body somehow; she was putting it in cold storage; she was decommissioning it.

He came home from work and played spouse with her,

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hoping that she was going to bounce back, that the old fun was going to bounce back. His business went under not long after, and that made it even easier. He had a huge bank loan hanging over his head. He would have to get another job eventually, a job working for someone else, but not for the moment. For the moment he lay around the house. They had come to the end of club-hopping. They had come to the end of it. Randy suspected that his wife had shot up while carrying the baby. She said she was *only snorting*, as though that excused it. No, really, she was only snorting coke. Not even heroin. No, really, she was clean. Really. And she'd disappear at night and he'd yell at her but sometimes he'd get that yen too, that yen to go out, and he'd do it. He didn't care what time she was coming in. And he would drink and tell someone on the next stool all of this. All of what I've told you. In fact, he told *me*. At the Ruin. They had come to the end of their marriage. It had lasted five months. It was time for him to leave his wife. This was not difficult to accomplish. Because Yvonne wanted to pursue unencumbered her own muse, the muse of her inactivity, the muse of her silence.

Later. Third week of June 1987. (Hot and humid, low visibility.) *The amphetamine of loss* with its jacked-up system of attribution and detachment roiled in Randy Evans. He was driving around lower Manhattan in a van he had rented to help move some stuff for the Japanese clothing line he just started working for. He was driving with the radio up loud. WFMU. They were playing something from *the band with no name*. He wondered if the guys in the band were still alive, if these were new songs or if the guys in the band were infighting acrimoniously about an upcoming tour, if they were thinking of tossing one another out of the band. One of them, he had learned once, was the son of a major stockbroker. The son of the head of some brokerage house. The rich dad had bought them all the PA equipment and a studio to record in. And the son, the son of this wealthy broker, was shooting dope and living in some rundown East Village basement apart-

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ment with nothing in it but a futon and a CD player. This kind of life gave *the band with no name* a lot of credibility.

And the song didn't sound like their songs had sounded to him two years before when he first heard them. It sounded different, as the whole East Village seemed different. It wasn't galleries and clubs anymore. The East Village was chain stores and crack dealers. People were getting sick, and Randy had taken the test too and had waited the three weeks it took then to get results. He couldn't imagine why he was negative. He and Yvonne had shared needles with a few people, definitely, with Jamie Lefferts and Donna Harvey and Mike and that other guy Mitch who came over with him to the house that time. And they had all gone to a really creepy shooting gallery off Delancey with someone named Juan. Who knew who they were sharing with? Back then you didn't think about it as much. Where the needle had been was somewhere you yourself had been, and the trail of that needle, the trail that led to the shooting gallery, was the history of your footfalls and of the people whose lives were a part of yours. Where you had walked was what you believed in and it marked you and your DNA and it left information for your children, for when they would want to know the truth about you. The past and the future were in Randy's every move, in the imitation Syd Barrett sound of *the band with no name*, in the Veselka, where he had spent, over the years, maybe a thousand dollars on pink borscht, in the fresh vegetable stand where, ten years from now, he would go with his son, the son he would have, and select the best carrots for a soup. But right now Randy's van was in the stream of the loneliest New Yorkers, those grasping, reaching for anyone in arm's length, hugging them close, pushing them off. Starting over. Falling into the disease, climbing out of it. Starting over. That's what the song by *the band with no name* sounded like. And that night Randy could have driven all night, on and off of the FDR watching the lights on the Williamsburg side of the river, he could have driven all night, never gone home to the new girlfriend, the new hostage, where he now lived in Brooklyn, because he had

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the past on his mind and the way the people from the past were not really past, the way they crowded around him on the streets of Manhattan, the way he was always running into them. And he had a sort of agenda too, because he was driving down Eighth Street, west to east. He got on it on Third Avenue, and then he drove the block past Trash and Vaudeville where he had bought a leather jacket and past St. Mark's Sounds and past the bar called simply *Bar* and then around the park, where a gallery called Gracie Mansion had once been, and into the deepest East Village, where 8BC used to be, and then he was in front of the bakery at the corner of Avenue D.

The projects were on one side of the avenue and on the other side it was all empty lots filled with temporary shelters of cardboard and plywood and decorated with giveaway blankets and plastics. Randy's van was in neutral and idling quietly near the corner and the radio was whispering some chant—some New York prayer, some specifically local ritual for the dead that doubled as a solicitation or an advertisement of some kind. He watched the entrance of the bakery, watched people going in and out.

Jorge was there, of course. Jorge Ruiz, who was going back to live with his mother in another year, after his detox in Hollis, Queens, after barely avoiding being locked up in Creedmore; and Doris Frantz, of Montclair, New Jersey, and Princeton University, who was thinking about picking up some cash on the side doing dominatrix work, just sort of turning the idea over anxiously. These two shadows came along the poorly lit streets, staggered by several minutes, walking slowly so as not to attract attention, so as not to appear to be in a hurry of any kind. Their hearts were in a terrible rush. They entered the bakery—Doris carrying a paper bag as if she intended to buy rolls—to give tens and twenties to people who would before long be arrested for trafficking—this arrest having no effect on neighborhood traffic.

Randy was hoping in a way that Yvonne wouldn't turn up. And that was when he saw her small, emaciated figure coming down the block. He didn't believe it at first. He didn't believe

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it was this easy to track somebody down, that junkies were so predictable, that he himself had been so predictable. He didn't believe that statistics and addiction were so navigable, that the arc of need was as orthodox as the law of falling bodies. No matter: there she was and she was *moving pretty fast*.

He left the van without even locking it, without turning it off. Material things had no place in that moment. The blackness of the sky was perfect and enduring. These shades came from the bakery and darted up the street looking for the first possible spot where they could tie off. And Randy was trotting across the street like he too was desperate in that way, toward Yvonne, and he had his hand out to touch her. He had a windbreaker tied around his waist. And his hair was really short and he didn't look like he had looked the year or so before. When they met.

She didn't either. Yvonne looked like she'd been orphaned by war; she looked like she suffered with unimaginable grief. When he spoke to her there was a long moment before she seemed to recognize that she was stopped now, that someone was talking to her, holding her up. She grimaced. She didn't seem to recognize him—she knew his face and who he was, but she didn't recognize any freight in the encounter—as if chance had been the only thing between then. She only wanted to get into the bakery. He was an impediment. The way she wheezed and coughed proved it. She was nervous. But the weirdest thing was that she was smiling. She was grimacing and smiling.

—Well, Randy said, coming to the end of an awkward politeness. Well, I just wanted to . . . to see you. Listen . . . Jeez, you know I don't want to say it but you *just don't look that good*.

Her own words seemed to drift up into her throat as if they had a separate set of controls, as if she were the dummy for some ventriloquist.

—What are you talking about?

—Forget it, Randy said.

—No, she said irritably. What the fuck are you talking about?

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—Listen, he said, if you want any help, if you ever want any help or anything . . . just let me know. I don't know . . .

—I don't have time, she said. Anyway, *I don't want your pity*. You're a fucking *junkie*, too.

And then she left him there. She hurried on. She took off.

He was stricken. He was halted. He was going to say something. He was going to defend himself, to defend his self-evident pride. But what could he say? He was standing there like a beseeching panhandler. Hadn't he been one of those club rats for whom all human folly—the suspension and flogging of men several feet above a stage—was the stuff of fun? Then why couldn't he let Yvonne *go on her merry way and finish the job*? Why not let all these people go? Let this stuff, these places recede into whitewashed accounts of youth he would present to friends when provoked momentarily into some foolish grandiosity about having simply *survived*. Why not let it go?

He called after her. Just as Jorge was coming out. Sweating quite a bit. Jorge, sweating like it was deepest July and he had no AC. Randy was calling after his wife, oblivious. On an empty street. On a moonless night. She never looked back. He was standing there watching. She never looked back.

There was one more time, a few years later, that he saw her again: when she had finally gotten clean, when she needed to discuss completing the divorce. She had Kaposi's sarcoma, and her face, into which a lively human rose color was at last returning, was freckled with lesions.

And there were others caught in the vine of those five minutes of June, in front of the cop shop on Eighth Street, in the moments just before and after: Buck Miller and Susan Ward and a guy who I used to see at the Marlin Café; and Debby, the girl who drove Doris to the airport, who also knew Yvonne; and Ray, the guy who hosed down the booths in Peep World; and Crystal, the pre-operative transsexual who slept with Jorge one night and then stole all his stuff; and the auctioneer at Wendy's; and the woman, Huck, with the

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dildo that glowed violet neon; and the guy getting fisted by two men at once; and Randy's friend Noel; and the men who had fucked Marlene when she was a hooker, most of whom didn't know she was dead; and two of the guys in *the band with no name* (the third had been shipped off to an expensive rehab). And some people I know whom I have not mentioned yet, like Robert and Jaimé and David and Frank from the Mudd Club and Dan and Crutch and Bob, Julia, Karen, Kenny and Kate. Lizzie. And there are other names I don't know yet. And myself. Me. I was there. All of us strode up and down Eighth Street like it was an actual artery in some larger life form, in some larger organism. As one of our number slipped into a storefront along Eighth Street, another passed by. None of us seemed to know the nature of the coincidences that bound us together, as I know now, or that junkies and masochists and hookers and those who have squandered everything are the ring of brightest angels around heaven.

And just by chance a bunch of these characters turned up in Yvonne's documentary, which had been transferred to film and then back to videotape and which now languished in a foot locker. Each of them was captured in and around the bars that Yvonne frequented when she was just out of school. I remember what she looked like then. When her face had an openness like good luck, like the big puffy clouds you see over the desert. I remember how bright her eyes were; I remember how excited she got by stuff, how a movie at the Film Forum could change her for weeks, how a certain record with just the right snare drum sound and a little bit of anger could keep her going all night, writing.

And the end of the film, the end of it for now, until somebody completes it for Yvonne, was like this. At a party crowded with the characters in this story, or other characters not unlike these, at a party at the Ruin weeks before its closing, with stalls strung with Christmas lights, surrounded by half-clothed erotic dancers, *the band with no name* struck up some kind of evolved march thing. In the basement of this wretched club. The music was fast. Everyone knew the song. The room

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was lit poorly. You could have slept with anyone in the room. You could have thrown your arms around anyone and it would have been okay. It would have been nice. The frame was frozen for a second. Then there was a jump cut and the band was throwing down its instruments and there was some buzz in a Fender Twin Reverb amp, a little feedback, but the guys in the band weren't paying any attention to it. And there was a close-up on Randy, laughing. His smile taking up the whole screen. And then it just ends.

I am going now. I am leaving.

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James Merrill

Tony: Ending the Life

Let's die like Romans,
Since we have lived like Grecians.
—Volpone

Across the sea at Alexandria,
Shallow and glittering, a single shroud-
Shaped cloud had stolen, leaving as it paused
The underworld dilated, a wide pupil's
Downward shaft. The not-yet-to-be mined
Villa, a fortune of stone cards each summer
Less readable, more crushing, lay in wait
Beneath the blue-green sand of the sea floor.
Plump in schoolboy shorts, you peered and peered.
For wasn't youth like that—its deep charades
Revealed to us alone by passing shades?
But then years, too, would pass. And in the glow
Of what came next, the Alexandria
You brought to life would up and go:
Bars, beaches, British troops (so slim—yum yum!),
The parties above all. Contagious laughter,
Sparkle and hum and flow,
Saved you from weighty insights just below;
Till from another shore
(Folégandros, the western end of Crete)
Age, astonished, saw those heavy things
Lifted by tricky prisms into light,
Lifted like holy offerings,
Gemlike, disinterested,
Within the fleet
Reliquary of wave upon wave as it crested.

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One year in Athens I let my beard grow.
The locals took it for a badge of grief.
Had someone died? Not yet, I tried to joke.
Of course beards came in every conceivable format—
Dapper, avuncular, deadbeat . . .
Mine warned of something creepier—uh-oh!
For over throat and lips had spread a doormat
On which to wipe filth brought in from the street.

Unfair! The boys were talkative and fun;
Far cleaner than my mind, after a bath.
Such episodes, when all was said and done,
Sweetened their reflective aftermath;
The denizens discovered in a dive
Relieved us (if not long or overmuch).
"See," breathed the mirror, "who's alive,
Who hasn't forfeited the common touch,

The longing to lead everybody's life"
—Lifelong daydream of precisely those
Whom privilege or talent set apart:
How to atone for the achieved uniqueness?
By dying everybody's death, dear heart—
Saint, terrorist, fishwife. Stench that appals.
Famines, machine guns, the Great Plague (your sickness),
Rending of garments, cries, mass burials.

I'd watched my beard sprout in the mirror's grave.
Mirrors *are* graves, as all can see:
Knew this emerging mask would outlast me,
Just as the life outlasts us, that we live . . .
And then one evening, off it came. No more
Visions of the deep. These lines behave
As if we were already gone—not so!
Although of course each time's a closer shave.

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One New Year's Eve, on midnight's razor stroke,
Kisses, a round of whiskies. You then drew
Forth from your pocket something bright—the new
Two drachma piece, I fancied, taking the joke
—But no. Proud of your gift, you warned: "Don't give
It to the barman. Look again." My double
Take took in the twenty-carat profile
Of a queen. Heavens preserve us; and long live

Orbits of convention whereby that solar
Metal sets the standard. (My five-dollar
Piece, traded for paper—astute maneuver—
Taught me from then on: don't trust Presidents.)
Houses here are bought with it still. Faces
Continue to give out sweet intelligence
No amount of "life" or "death" debases.
Speaking of heavens, Maria, a prime mover

In ours, one winter twilight telephoned:
Not for you to see her so far gone,
But to pick up, inside the unlatched door,
A satchel for safe keeping. *Done and done*,
You called from home to say. But such a weight,
Who lifted it? No one. She'd had to kick,
Inch by inch, your legacy down the hall,
The heavy bag of gold, her setting sun.

•

The sea is dark here at day's end
And the moon gaunt, half-dead
Like an old woman—like Madame Curie
Above her vats of pitchblende
Stirred dawn to dusk religiously
Out in the freezing garden shed.

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It is a boot camp large and stark
To which you will be going.
Wave upon wave of you. The halls are crowded,
Unlit, the ceiling fixtures shrouded.
Advancing through the crush, the matriarch
Holds something up, mysteriously glowing.

Fruit of her dream and labor, see, it's here
(See too how scarred her fingertips):
The elemental sliver
Of matter, heading for its own eclipse
And ours—this "lumière de l'avenir"
Passed hand to hand with a faint shiver:

Light that confutes the noonday blaze.
A cool uncanny blue streams from her vial,
Bathing the disappearers
Who asked no better than to gaze and gaze . . .
Too soon your own turn came. Denial
No longer fogged the mirrors.

You stumbled forth into the glare—
Blood-red ribbon where you'd struck your face.
Pills washed down with ouzo hadn't worked.
Now while the whole street buzzed and lurked
The paramedics left you there,
Returning costumed for a walk in Space.

The nurse thrust forms at you to sign,
Then flung away her tainted pen.
. . . . Lie back now in that heat
Older than Time, whose golden regimen
Still makes the palm grow tall and the date sweet . . .
Come, a last sip of wine.

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Lie back. Over the sea
Sweeps, faint at first, the harpist's chord.
Purple with mourning, the royal barge gasps nearer.
Is it a test? a triumph? No more terror:
How did your namesake, lovesick Antony,
Meet the end? By falling on his sword

—A story in Plutarch
The plump boy knew from History class.
Slowly the room grows dark.
Stavro who's been reading you the news
Turns on a nightlight. No more views.
Just your head, nodding off in window-glass.

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Two Poems by Philip Levine

Edward Leiberman, Entrepreneur, Four Years After the Burnings on Okinawa

The light sifts down from the naked bulb
he's quickened with a string. He speaks
to no one out of the well of his anger.
He says, "I hate this," and he stops.
He means more than this one-man shop
on Grand River where he stores the drive-
shafts, bearings, and U-joints swiped
from the Rockwell Arsenal. He means
the stalled traffic outside, the semis
barking and coughing, the gray floor
inside littered with crowded pallets
so filthy they seem furred. He means
the single desk and chair, the hat rack
holding no hats, he even means the phone
he's become so good at, for he's learned
to give nothing away that matters and still
sound serious, to say, "No, we never
allow that much time," and, "Pretty good,
and you?" in a voice so deep even he
doesn't know it. Wardie, everyone's cousin,
still in his twenties, though the blue-
black double-breasted size 46 he strains
against makes him look forty, the hard fat
of neck, upper chest, and shoulders draws
him down into the chair, and he swivels
abruptly toward those he can't see. Go ahead,
reach out and stroke the dark stubble,
run a lone cautious finger down the channels
for the tears he spills only in sleep.
He won't bite you. He's Wardie, the lost

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brother no one remembers, so give him
the love he can't give himself. Feel him
shudder and draw back, not because he kept
his word and killed, not because your thought
became his act, but because it came to this.

In a Village Near Paris

You can tell by the way the sky
has turned rose and the blue houses
have begun to open their eyes,
night is coming on. The street too
is rose, its stones reflecting
the stones of the sky. October.
The men wear dark hats, the women
keep to the center of the street
and stare straight ahead. The circles
of smoke rising from the roofs
stall in midair because nothing
goes up or down in a rose world.
Detroit, 1933. A village
invented by Henry Ford and named
after a narrowing in water,
named in French because across
the black river Ford saw Paris,
not Ontario. In October
the maples give garlands of rose
leaves, on fences roses cling
by their claws, and the street lamps
burn on in rose and off in
a duller rose when morning breaks
the rose of the sky. My father,
in a black hat, stops, remembering
he left me behind in a shop

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where clothes are sold to master
the craft of tying shoelaces.
Will I grow into the shape
of a man speaking French? He turns
back, but not it's too late for night—
as cherished as a black rose—meets
itself rising from the empty street.

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Irving Feldman

The Little Children of Hamelin

Pewter, then silver, the palest gold, an almost
silence we almost could hear, dawn led us out.
So light a sound had lifted us from our pillows.
And to hear it clearer, there at the end
of our hearing where it licked at our ears,
we crept softly away from the sleeping town.
What was it singing, ringing, piping, saying?
One more, one step more, and all that we always
were overhearing at last would speak to us
—where the world, whispering whispering, was.

•

Like a reed, hollow green tender heaven-high,
he played, and the world sang out of his mouth
in flowers; crocus and columbine and daisy
and rose the iris the lilac the lily blew
and scattered and flew, arrows we chased after
in the light in the wind into the world
until we had no names left to call them only
our shouts and cries that burst from his mouth and bloomed.
The stones in the road clattered and clay laughed.

•

We are little children. Our parents say.
And everything happens. Sun brightens the sky.
We play. They call us in to supper. We sleep.
We wake to promises they made to us.
Today we'll visit Auntie. Tomorrow we pick
flowers in the field. One day, we shall go to school.

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And always through the porridges and pennies,
the playthings and pettings, a question scurries
out of sight down small black holes in our dreams.
What do they need us for? What use are children?
—so easy to overlook and leave behind,
too weak to draw a dogcart up a hill,
who own nothing, to whom nothing is owed.
Let them say they wanted us, we don't believe
in grown-ups' love, but in the mercy of their whims.

•

We knew the sweetness of power, it knew us.
The road coursed along, coursed through us, like song,
smoothing our way. All the words in the world, every
thing, all that our parents held aloof, became
the tune's single word. Because we had nothing,
we who had nothing else, now had the word.
We were his children, and he was our champion.
And so we followed him, column and tongue
of sunshine and sound, of revelation,
to know how high how deep how far life could lead.
And nothing nothing resisted our song.

•

A mile or two gone by and we understood
the one we followed in the golden tatters and
the green patches of a roaming tree, he knew,
though it was strange and jolly, a single tune
he piped to himself alone over and over
—lonely as we should be had we never been born.
How sad for him—his only playmate was a song!
And so we trooped along and kept him company,
and knew then that not everything is made clear:
secret within each secret a darkness keeps mum.

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•

On the last hill we looked back a last time,
and saw a town shining beside its silver stream.
So that was our village, where we'd always been!
See, we exclaimed to ourselves, to each other,
there in the tiny streets, those little people
so much smaller than we are, those must be
our parents—just see them circle and stamp
their heavy feet as if battering down the dirt
of a grave into place. And spring aloft again!
Look, their heavy pockets are leaping up, too!
Are they dancing their dismay, having seen us
go marching away? Or skipping about in joy
since we are all the little coin they had to pay?
Look now! like living things the gold swollen
inside their pockets grows bigger as they leap!

•

Within a wall of wind a well of water rose
enclosing a void where one unbearable noise
was a crowd of voices roaring all at once.
The dark tongue drew us up into its song.
And there we floated while the sweetest voice sang,
"Only you can save them—*say* you will save them!
Even now they think of you and say, 'We were deaf,
heard nothing, not the piping, or the patter and
chatter of our babies leaving, going away,
and kept our coins because we were afraid to die.
They knew better than we the right way to live.
We'll follow our children and be like children, too'
—for what you left behind you gave away,
and what you shall refuse to claim is more and more
abundance you bestow. A world so abounding
is a world of innocence and a world
without death." Oh yes, we will, we shouted,

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but tell us, How much must we give away?
"Everything," the voice sang, "everything. And yourselves.
And at the last you yourselves will be given,"
sang the voice fading, letting us down, "away."

•

Mouth a darkness, pipe a cracked bone wheezing
bloody spittle to the ground his back was that bent
down, mound of rotting rags like a walking grave
—an old man led us, piping himself into
the earth, and we his raggle-taggle funeral.
Helpless, compelled, we clung to his suffering,
knowing a thing so horrible must be holy.
Sometimes, wanted to comfort, and dared not touch;
sometimes, tootled on our toy pipes to please him;
or ran ahead, howling, taunting, Old man! Old man!
Catch us if you can!—adding our children's mite to
whatever power it was had marked him for its own
and danced a mad jig now on his miserable flesh.
Life could lead as far as deep as he had crept
—then left him good as dead, and still he lived:
Complete. Real. Past help, hurting. Alone. Accursed.
Powerful with what rejoiced, destroying him.
From this final milepost every step must start.
We vowed to carry him with us everywhere
we went, and felt on our heads blessing descend.

•

Suddenly the pipe was still, piper was gone.
In the place of his mouth a river squirmed, squealed
—one endless rat of one million rats drowning
and drowned: Rat River, cobbled with sleek rat backs
and wet rat bellies, where little rat feet slipped,
and caught in the thatch of rat whiskers and tails.
Black bubbles boiled up gleaming and looked at us.

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White foam raged and gnawed at the night for breath.
Abandoned by music, and frightened to death
by death, then and there we'd have turned and run home,
but the wind at our backs brought us happy sounds
of children who scraped our bowls and rolled our hoops
and called our pets—laughing, golden children grown
from gold coins our parents hoarded when we left.

•

"You can, you can, come over here, come over here,
if you are light enough, slight enough, faint enough . . ."
little voices were calling out, and calling out
from over the squealing river, "I'm lonely here!"
—runaway children, abandoned and lost children,
stolen children, and strays, and foundlings, and poor waifs
sold to be someone's slaves were calling out to us;
and the ghost children we children would never have
from the distant shore were singing, "Please play with me!"
But when we crossed to them, we found no place at all,
no children there, but voices saying, voices singing,
"You can, you can, be music too, be music too,
forever, and forevermore." And so, and so, we were.

•

If on a summer's night, unable to sleep,
you throw open a window to the starry sky,
and the softest air from far off enters your head,
and life is wide with possibility again,
before returning to the sweetness of your bed
and the charmed oblivion of your dreaming,
remember us lost on night's farthest shore,
and linger on a little while at your window
to hum, though faint and broken, this story you hear.
Buy yourself back, father, mother, you can,
you can, for the price of a song, you can,
from death—and take us in, feel us, feel
us, give us a home here in your breath!

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Two Poems by Maureen Bloomfield

La Grande Châsse

When the Midwest sky is that old-clothes, cardboard
Color, and the hillsides are too visible,
In their poverty of intention, exposed,
I think, sometimes, of how you blocked
The future, as if it were a scene, and wrote it
In a letter before you drove all night through snow.

Twenty years after, I dream, and it is Sainte-Chapelle:
The out-of-bounds, the treacherous clerestory;
The vestibule's diminution, and
The rose window, cinereous in gloom.
So much, at last, I want to tell you! The story
Of the world, but it is night upon

The stained glass windows of the wall. The virgin bows
And would be taken. Joseph wakes.
The nave is barred with lilies and with snow. *Love*
Is unendurable. She will not know him.
Joseph wakes, and at the angel's voice, he goes.

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Postulant

Leonardo's *Annunciation*

It is *gravitas*, the gray of quarry stone, the burden
of the middle plane, the *moving toward* the heavy hour
the angels come, bearing grief whose name is benediction.
The beauty here is of ornament—the lectern, the cassone—
both calculations. The trees, serialized, the lilies limned with
gilt,
as if Leonardo had copied an exercise from his notebook, the
flowers
have the aridity of the secondhand, for what is more
melancholy
than exactitude, the graphite stick's precision that imitates
the economy of doubt: *it is so small it can be used again*.

The balustrade divides the plane in half: the negative space
like dark water that stops the heart of the one
who looks the longest down, because between duty
and inspiration is a wall, between the heart and its desires,
an obfuscation, so the work is flawless, hence oblique,
no incarnation. It records, instead, the scrutiny
of exactly how one failed *in Verocchio's studio, over time*—
propped against the wall and taken out
to be looked at and to do again.

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For it's not a gift if it's asked for. *The lowliest*
of his servants was simple, saying Yes, yet she was troubled
How can this be? But he was more comfortable with misgiving
and so the paint's application is scrupulous
not Fra Angelico daubing the transparent color wet on wet
but a man *because song was denied him*
who drew, speaking not of grace and its lambent color
but of work, of working through the halftone
that announces the grievous half-time, the pause
in the plainsong—how the soul strives
to magnify the Lord by growing small, and because
It sufficeth not, the postulant, in chorus,
claims, stretching forth a hand.

The viewer, too, is outside the composition—
reading the metaphor of the garden that was closed.
Dressed already in gray and umber, she looks up from her
weaving:
she is not surprised. *God is my strength* welcomes Mary
to her work which was *to know* the bitter
plainness, the plaintiveness
of restitution: the gray overwrought to black:
the word made death so it could dwell among us.

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Bin Ramke

Art. Love. Geology

Ist es schön in der Sonne zu gehn.
—Trakl

Here is a little book of instructions. It says care
must be taken. For instance, a form of health as a
version of vanity (as when a poor stonecutter set up
shop to live off the vanity of travelers, pioneers
who stopped to scratch names and dates in inviting
surfaces
but granite is hard on the amateur. So a graffitist,

•

an American artist, against the rapacious
rock body of the earth did cover the good body with
American names, this national poetry which must be
written carelessly before the one war, after the other.
The view was magnificent, and the air smelled of future)
vanity in this world, my Dear, your hair the color,
this kind of poetry, this world tells itself stories,
O famous your green shoes your fabulous wishes your
hair the color of tea and your green shoes aren't you
something.
It says here you must listen to your own history, it says
you must take care, and it says here you must pronounce
your name, your own name here _____.

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•

This man did believe in the monochrome
possibilities, the way the camera once would focus
such a narrow range of color thus the *sharpness*
of the old photographs, the clarity of vision
of the American West before the development
of panchromatic films. And the movies, the cow-
boys and Indians blazing black and white.

•

"At the edge of the forest / Stillness encounters
a dark deer" —the way she said it, my friend
said it of Trakl, his poem. *Geistliche Dämmerung*
and it is snowing now and cold. When I knew her
we were young and the age of the earth indeterminate.
Forests had edges. Deer were a species of Indian.

•

Here is the world come to comfort me. Here
is a child come to follow me home.

•

The traveling salesman said to the farmer's daughter:
we are in this world together and there is no place
to sleep, so let's join hands and sing of the glory
and honor of the forest and its deer which watch us;
see their eyes reflect the light, see them wait for us.

•

Und rings erglänzten Hügel und Wald.

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•

And surrounding us, you and I, Love,
something like the night—at least it is dark,
at least it is silent. It seems to move
only when we do not look at it. It seems
to be the world, but who knows, and we,
do we really care more for each other
than for the world, can the songs be right?

•

Surrounding shimmering in ultraviolet
the darkness to eyes not our own, but we
have gauges to measure this shimmer.
The insects see in light not ours
the insects see flowers in a violet so deep
its darkness shimmers in the corner of
my eye as if I made it up.

•

If hills emerge too slowly to see, still, evidence
remains—it's what geology says, that this earth
moves beneath each lover, slow and impossible
but there you have it, the hills rise around us
when we are not looking and one day an alp
taps you on the shoulder as you kiss
and your mind wasn't on the time; it is late.

•

This is the forest, here, we live here. Arboreal
safety. Who cares for evolution. Here, let me
love you then we'll fall from the trees like
fruit, the sound it makes, the forest surrounds
our racial despair. Oh how we hate to be human.

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Kay Sloan

Breakfast at Keseberg's Diner

Sacramento, 1848

After the snow, after carved corpses
exposed the icy survival of the last
Donner Party members, the Belgian
Keseberg boasted of eating the frozen flesh
of dead companions, starved pioneers
who'd stormed the Great Salt desert in five frantic
days, depleted of water, oxen
fleeing, only to face the High Sierras'
great face, a road no wagon could pass.
They made it a day late, double-teamed, double-
crossed by a scheming guide trying to
cross that high pass before the first blizzard struck.
A day too late. They arrived the night
the snows began, flurries flying random as
luck. Inside lean-tos and sheds, the log
shanties with beds of straw and animal fur,
the watch began: the slow erosion
of food supplies, of skin that shrank on faces
till masks of hunger hid all but the eyes.

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The angel and the animal breathed
together in bodies hungry for each death,
the next feast that would mean survival.
They carefully labelled the muscles, organs:
kin would never eat kin. Though they kept
certain taboos, their two Indian guides crept
off into the forest, horrified,
to die alone. Later, after rescuers
brought the last survivors to safety
(*How can we call ourselves decent, if we fail*
to go? they'd asked from their valley fort.
We must do it for California's good name),
after Keseberg had forgotten
the cold and wind and endless white days buried
at that forsaken camp, he answered
when they asked what it's like to eat human flesh.
Smiling, he confessed: when the body
craves only life, the taste is not so bad. Ghoul,
they called him, thrilled to look in his eyes
and say they would never have done as he did,
rather die than pick meat from a corpse.

When he opened his breakfast diner
in Sacramento, they stood in lines outside
to wait. Keseberg had hung pictures
above the door: the High Sierras' beauty.
In the morning, the customers came,
ordering ham and pancakes, watching the man
or savage at his stove, with their eyes
curious as a cat's, wondering what pact
had been made between angel and beast,
words written in blood that might season a feast.

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Stephen Gibson

The Bra

As my wife buys our daughter her first bra
I wait beside the escalator
with our packages from Sears and J.C. Penney's,
and think of what Balthus meant
when he denied the erotic in his paintings—
who saw only the pubescent form
in its undevelopment, whether nude before a mirror
or clothed, reading, one leg over an armchair;
to which one critic argues
Balthus invites the viewer to complete such content,
the dreaminess of adolescence
whose adventures are in daydreaming, in reading books
or in listening to the radio
while waiting for the real adventures to begin
(hopeful, and therefore innocent—
which Balthus thought his content—
because they do not yet know what it is that *we* know).
No, there is nothing of the erotic
in the awkward adolescent leaning forward on her elbow,
in her skirt, reading a newspaper on the floor,
or in the girl, asleep, spread-eagled on a chaise
and her cat lapping from a bowl of milk.

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Three Poems Reginald Shepherd

A Muse

He winds through the party like wind, one of the just
who live alone in black and white, bewildered

by the eden of his body. (*You, you talk like winter
rain.*) He's the meaning of almost-morning walking home

at five A.M., the difference a night makes
turning over into day, simple birds staking claims

on no sleep. Whatever they call those particular birds.
He's the age of sensibility at seventeen, he isn't worth

the time of afternoon it takes to write this down.
He's the friend that lightning makes, raking

the naked tree, thunder that waits for weeks to arrive;
he's the certainty of torrents in September, harvest time

and power lines down for miles. He doesn't even know
his name. In his body he's one with air, white as a sky

rinsed with rain. It's cold there, it's hard to breathe,
and drowning is somewhere to be after a month of drought.

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Song to the Siren

The hulks lie on their sides amid the breakers,
the wrecks of mischance rot. I could lose myself
in riddled waves: sailors drown daily there.
I walked the cliffs and talked with salt and spray.
Sing me again the blazing pavilions, the carbon-dated
roofless towers. You sit alone
among antiquities of spume, dispensing
gull-ridden rocks and masts, the click of whitecaps
on a rust-locked shore.
The sailors
have what they came searching for, bone-box of breath
beneath a salvaged ocean, for which
there is no key. I carry this cold front
stirred into a tune, inhaled like liquid
nitrogen. The clouds above the beach are poison
like the sea, but their place is known. Odysseus
had his nostalgia: traitor king, slaughterer.
I count myself a suitor.

"Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair"

In the painting by Guido Reni of Saint Sebastian
in the Palazzo Rosso, which reproduction makes available
to those who travel only on the page, the saint to be
(he's not yet assumed by artifice, encumbered

with perfections) endures continual martyrdom
with a visual sigh, gazing almost directly upward
as if to ask *What now my love*, or hum a chorus of
Is that all there is, the body always some song

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or another. The eye tramping the simulacrum
of a surface hands have touched can't help but note
how lush the uncorrupted flesh appears: the curve, for one
example, of the waist (narrowest circuit of the boy),

just beneath the instance of an arrow's entrance, or
the shadow just above the tangled loincloth that is surely
pubic hair. One grasps that sainthood is an attribute of youth,
the *wondrous fair*, as in old ballads; they always end.

The boy in the Eagle Discount Supermarket,
for another, an apparition in a backwards baseball cap
appraising cuts of meat in artificial light,
deciding what he can afford

to buy, how much each cut costs. *I love the ground*
on where he stands. His face? Unverifiable.

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Gary Mitchner

On the Western Edge

Morgan retreats. He retreats into Schubert,
into his journal, into his imagination, his silence.
Away from the personalities, the out-of-order,
from the invading noise, Muzak and spoken words.

In the box of the hotel room he felt separated,
disconnected in this West Coast paradise;
Morgan looked out onto the immaculate offices
to see no one but cars, somehow indicative of mood.

Yet there was comfort, albeit disconcerting, confusing:
the lights seemed just right, the flow to be observed
so that although he knew he placed in that stream
he also appreciated the box, the view and the quiet.

At the window he stood nude while a man on the street
watched. In the bed he masturbated, ignoring Mother's
warnings. Under the shower his stocky body melted
down the drain. From confinement he drew strength.

Mother would disapprove of these indulgences:
the body is a necessary evil to be decorated,
sex certainly calls for a partner for a purpose,
and there's nothing to know beyond one's composure.

Much has happened to Morgan lately but what's the use
of telling anyone, all his energy goes into erasure,
smudging the truth, hoping his mind will protect itself
against itself, cleanse itself since clean slates

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require new information daily and what vanishes
gets twisted into scrambled dreams and odd signals
not worth bothering about. If nothing matters,
he is free to create all new scenarios for now.

He wants there to be epiphanies; instead the dulling
process satisfies the wounds, softens the difficult
and evens out the bumps and accidental bruises.
He has learned from Mother the nature of being still.

California does not nourish his middle-way needs:
the desert and the ocean squeeze the state
into heated intensity and contradictory coolness.
Mother says moderation is the Greek way; he laughs.

Flying home over the brown creases and natural wrinkles,
he feels older, scorched by the sun, dry and distinct,
unlike the neat plotting of the palm-lined roads,
unlike the youthful and naive tanned faces on the beach.

Mother would welcome him home without noticing;
she would say "I hope you have *that* out of your system"
and he would hide inside the labyrinths of corn fields,
absorb the sun through the window, desire salt water.

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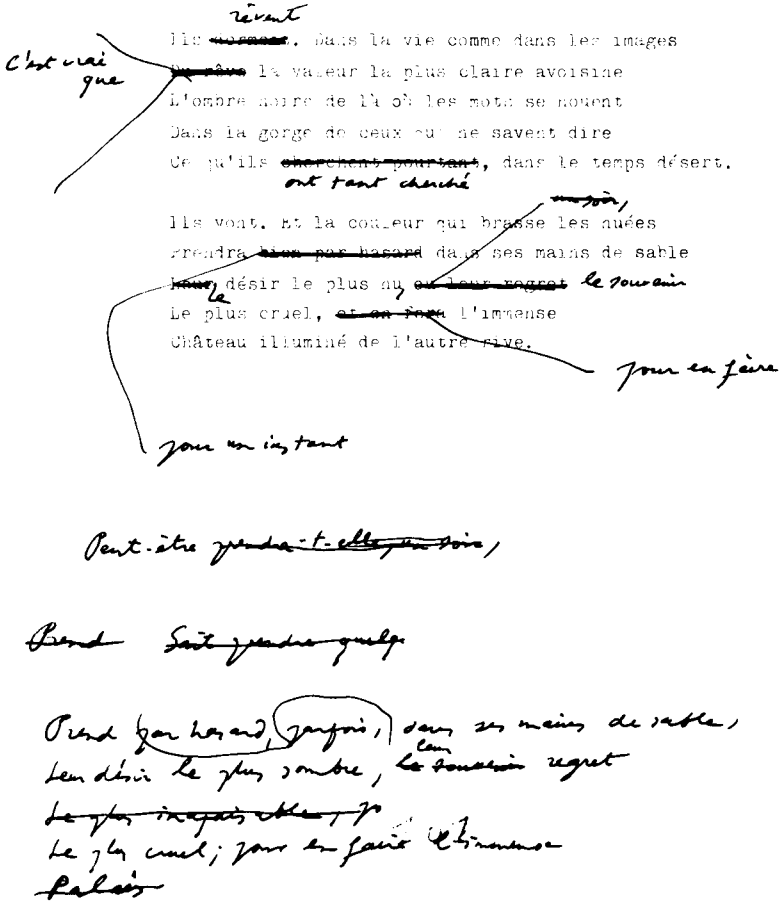
rêvant
C'est vrai que
Ils [illegible]. Dans la vie comme dans les images
[illegible] la valeur la plus claire avoisine
L'ombre noire de là où les mots se nouent
Dans la gorge de ceux qui ne savent dire
Ce qu'ils [illegible], dans le temps désert.
ont tant cherché
Ils vont. Et la couleur qui brasse les nuées
prendra [illegible] dans ses mains de sable
le désir le plus nu [illegible] le souvenir
Le plus cruel, [illegible] l'immense
Château illuminé de l'autre rive.
pour en faire
pour un instant
Peut-être prendra-t-elle [illegible],
Prend Sait prendre quelq
Prend par hasard, parfois, dans ses mains de sable,
son désir le plus sombre, le souvenir regret
le plus cruel; pour en faire l'immense
Palais

A manuscript page from Bonnefoy's poem "Ce qui fut sans lumière."

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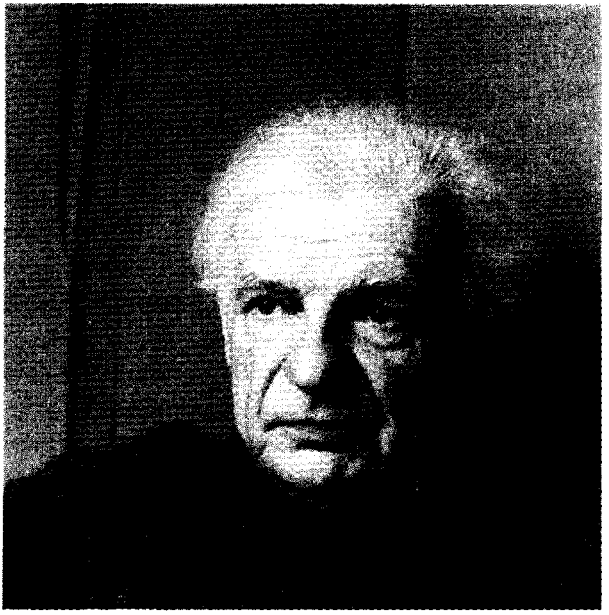

© Mathilde Bonnefoy

Yves Bonnefoy

The Art of Poetry LXIX

Yves Bonnefoy works in a tiny apartment in Montmartre, a few steps from where he lives. His windows at the back look over a small garden, one of the few remaining parts of Montemartre that has not been built upon—a huge maple tree shades the building and the rose-covered walls. The apartment is jam-packed with books and tables, the largest of which is the poet's desk, so crowded that it hides him almost completely from view. A small, worm-eaten statue of Sainte Barbe, "early seventeenth-century", a Giacometti lithograph of his

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wife Annette, an oil painting depicting Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mathilde Mautē (Verlaine's wife), and photographs of Rimbaud and Baudelaire somehow find space on the walls and in niches among the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. "I cross the road every morning to try and work here quietly," he explains.

Yves Bonnefoy was born on June 24, 1923 in Tours. He studied mathematics, history of science and philosophy at the University of Poitiers and the Sorbonne. Later he worked for three years at the National Center for Scientific Research before devoting himself completely to writing and lecturing.

Bonnefoy's first book of poems, Du Mouvement et de l'immobilitē de Douve (On the Motion and Immobility of Douve), *was published in 1953 and won him immediate recognition as a new, major voice. Three other books appeared at irregular intervals and were collected in one volume under the title of* Poèmes. *In 1987 he published* Ce qui fut sans lumière (In the Shadow's Light), *followed by* Début et fin de la neige *in 1991. Today he is acknowledged as the most outstanding and influential poet in France today.*

Since 1954 Bonnefoy has also produced many works of literary and art criticism — Rimbaud, Un rêve fait à Mantoue, Rome 1630, Entretiens sur la poésie (Dialogues on Poetry). *His translations of Shakespeare's plays are considered the best to date, and two years ago he published his translation of some fifty poems by Yeats.*

Over the past thirty years Bonnefoy has been a regular visitor to universities in the United States as professor of literature and lecturer, while holding occasional teaching posts at French universities as well. Since 1981 he has been the Professor of Comparative Poetics at the Collège de France. He is the director of the collection Idées et Recherches *at Flammarion, and the editor of* Mythologies, *now published in English by University of Chicago Press. He is married to American painter Lucy Vines, and they have one daughter, Mathilde.*

Last fall the Bibliothèque Nationale honored the poet with a large comprehensive exhibition of his manuscripts, first editions and pictures.

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With characteristic generosity Yves Bonnefoy devoted many hours to the following interview, which took place in June 1992 in his study. A year later another session, this time with a particular emphasis on his books written in collaborations with painters and on his writing about art, took place at the Château de Tours.

INTERVIEWER

You were born on midsummer night in Tours, where the most beautiful French is said to be spoken, in a region which was the birthplace of Ronsard, one of French poetry's founding fathers. Did you ever live there?

YVES BONNEFOY

Yes, up to the age of twenty; then I hardly ever returned, except to visit my mother who lived there until her death. Lately I have had reasons to renew my visits.

INTERVIEWER

Your father was a railway man and your mother a schoolteacher. Were they interested in culture? Because the equivalent milieu in England is not.

BONNEFOY

Not especially. My father's parents were innkeepers near the valley of the Lot River. Theirs was a little place near the railway station, with a few rooms they let. My grandmother cooked, and my grandfather looked after the clients. He also cut hair and made jackets. One day some priests were passing through the village, and they asked if anybody had a little boy whom they could take and educate well, and who would perhaps accept later to become a priest. My grandfather gave them my father whom they took with them to the seminary at Rocamadour.

After a couple of years my father, who did not like studying, ran away. His father was angry and said to him that if he

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didn't want to study he should look after himself. So he left home and became an apprentice to a blacksmith relative. After his quite long military service he went to work in the workshop of the railways, building locomotives. He worked hard, especially during World War I, and was rather poor. I don't think he had any time for culture.

My mother's father was a schoolteacher. He did aspire to culture; he had built a little pinewood desk at which he wrote all sorts of books that he bound himself—a treatise on history, and one on morals—just for the pleasure of writing. Perhaps he had the illusion that he was a writer and one day would be published. I have kept some of his manuscripts. They contain a great variety of things, for example drawings of plants and flowers, and a study of geometrical perspective. He was not religious, yet he wrote a small book on religious instruction and sacred history, *Love of One's Neighbor*, which I suppose was his way of accepting the priest who was his neighbor.

He wanted his two daughters to be school teachers. My aunt was rather intellectual and accepted, but my mother became seriously ill at fifteen, which interrupted her studies. So she decided to be a nurse, which was very frowned upon in those days. She worked as a nurse during the war, after having married my father and later became an *institutrice*—a primary school teacher.

My father died when I was thirteen. By then my grandfather was also dead, but the latter was certainly an important influence in my life—this old man who had books, who thought, read and wrote, created an example and a reference for me. Today a child of such a milieu would perhaps not have the same access to culture and to cultivated society as I did: the education system was very good and efficient then—we had excellent state primary schools where we learned things, while today, especially in poor neighborhoods, it's all rowdiness and heckling. My grandfather himself owed his career to the fact that school had become compulsory in his time, as his mother was an unmarried shepherdess who looked after pigs in the local oakwoods, and would have been unable to do anything

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for her son. But he got a prize because he received the best grades on his exams of the students in all the schools of the region and then a grant to a teacher's training college (*école normale*) and then became a teacher. One could say that he was "a son of the Rights of Man," as Rimbaud said, which proclaims that all men have a right to education, therefore to primary school. After the school certificate I myself entered a competition and obtained a grant to continue studying at the Lycée Descartes in Tours. Today there are too many students in the classrooms, but then we learned Latin and read books.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do after the lycée?

BONNEFOY

I entered one of those special classes which prepare pupils for the entrance exam of the *grandes écoles*, scientific or literary. I chose the scientific alternative, while simultaneously doing a degree in mathematics at the University of Poitiers. Then I realized that the *grandes écoles* destined you for the sort of profession—engineering, mining, mathematics teaching—which I had no wish to pursue, for I already had an idea of what I did want to do with my life—to write. So I came up to Paris, supposedly to finish my degree in mathematics, but in fact to find the surrealist milieu. At the *lycée* in Tours I had learned about surrealism and read André Breton.

INTERVIEWER

When you decided to be a writer did you intend to be a poet?

BONNEFOY

I still have a little anthology of poems that my aunt gave me, perhaps for my seventh birthday, in which she has inscribed, "To my godson—future poet." There was no mystery: even before I learned to read and write I knew it was in order to write poetry. Why? Perhaps because of a feeling that I could not practice the professions I saw around me.

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INTERVIEWER

During adolescence did you read much poetry? Or write any?

BONNEFOY

I started reading poetry in primary school: Victor Hugo, the romantics and the Parnassians—they were part of the curriculum. In my grandfather's library there were some anthologies of nineteenth-century poetry. Alfred de Vigny impressed me most; indeed I won a competition by reciting Vigny's *"Moses"* with an enthusiasm that touched the examiner. In fact this poem and *"La Maison du Berger"* are among the most beautiful poems in the French language, unfairly neglected today.

INTERVIEWER

What about the Parnassians? Which ones impressed you?

BONNEFOY

I was not much taken by their poems, but I liked Leconte de Lisle's translation of Homer, especially his *Iliad*, which brought me the classical world. I have often felt a great difference between myself and the next generation, those who were twenty in 1950, although it is only a few years, because I had read in my grandfather's library books that were later less accessible. The next generation was reading Michaux, Prévert, Éluard—twentieth-century authors. I'm glad to have read the Greek classics, and French ones too, writers like Racine and Corneille.

INTERVIEWER

When did you read Baudelaire and Rimbaud—poets whose influence on your own work is strongly felt?

BONNEFOY

When you have only a few books, anthologies are in the forefront. When I was fourteen or fifteen I read *Towards a*

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Lyrical Alchemy, in which I found poems by Baudelaire, Nerval, Sainte-Beuve—the beautiful poems of early modernity. Later I read Valéry for a while. I was not the only one to be taken by Valéry—it was a phenomenon of the era. When I arrived in Paris in November 1943 I rushed to hear Valéry's lectures at the Collège de France. We were not many in the auditorium, and I did not know anyone. Later I discovered that Cioran and Roland Barthes were there too. We were all fascinated by Valéry, though he was not an interesting lecturer—perhaps because he was already rather worn out, ill, or perhaps because he was not interested in other poets' works, though they're rather useful if one has accepted the responsibility of twenty-six hours of teaching per year! One can't speak that long about oneself, even if one is *"le témoin du moi"* (the witness to oneself), which he wanted to be. Still, I admired him, and I still love some of his poems, especially *"Le Cimetière marin"*, which is beautiful. Then I rebelled and wrote an incendiary essay about him: "Paul Valéry the Apostate," meaning apostasy against poetry. It has been reprinted in my book of essays *L'Improbable.*

Cioran did the same thing a few years later: he was asked to write a preface for the American publication of *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, edited by Jackson Mathews. As he wrote he felt his anger growing, and the text was so vitriolic that of course the publishers rejected it.

INTERVIEWER

Borges wrote that the famous lines from *"Le Cimetière marin"*: *"La mer, la mer toujours recommencée! \ Ô récompense après une pensée"* are absolutely meaningless—for why should a thought need a recompense—that it was a bluff.

BONNEFOY

It was a bluff, perhaps, but also a confession: Valéry was a very physical, sensual man, and he felt that thought deprived him of the best part of existence. The poem ends with:

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Le vent se lève! . . . Il faut tenter de vivre!
L'air immense ouvre et referme mon livre,
La vague en poudre ose jaillir des rocs!
Envolez-vous, pages tout éblouies!
(The wind is rising! . . . We must try to live!
The immense air opens and shuts my book,
A wave dares burst in powder over the rocks!
Pages, whirl away in a dazzling riot!)

which shows that wind, water, sunshine, are more important to him than "the book," even if the latter calls him every day. One has to understand that, for it is legitimate, whatever Borges may think of it.

INTERVIEWER

So you came to Paris at the end of 1943 to meet Breton, though surrealism was over—Antonin Artaud, and many others had left since the 1920s, while Louis Aragon and Paul Éluard had gone in 1931 and 1939 respectively to join the communist party. Robert Desnos was about to die, so who was there?

BONNEFOY

In 1944 Breton and a few other surrealists were still in America where they had spent the war years. Victor Brauner, one of the movement's painters was in Paris, and he introduced me to Breton when he came back from the United States in 1946. But you know "how beautiful was the Republic under the Empire!" (*Que la République était belle sous l'Empire*), as they say. After the war I was disappointed that Breton had no longer any grand projects, nor perhaps real convictions. He was content to preside twice a week over an assembly of two dozen very young admirers. I was among them, but I didn't like it—these long café conversations which lead nowhere.

In fact Breton had a guilty conscience for having left France while she languished under the Occupation, unlike certain surrealists who joined the Resistance and took risks. But he

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was wrong, because the young who had read the poems of the Resistance felt sympathy for their emotions but thought them insufficiently adventurous as poetry. They felt that the great alchemical, daring experiment of poetry could not be reduced to the immediate concerns of society. In other words they were waiting for the arrival of a poet who had preserved the freedom of poetic writing, and they were ready to see Breton take the lead in a new experimental venture. Instead he returned anxious, locked himself in with a new group of admirers, and even almost ceased to write. For twenty years until his death he wrote nothing poetically important. Yet he was still young—only fifty!

INTERVIEWER

Among this new group of young disciples, were there any who have continued as poets? Who produce valuable work?

BONNEFOY

I would say Georges Hénin, who was the leader of surrealism in Egypt, who is now dead. I liked him very much; he was a free spirit. No one else of real prominence. Breton himself was courteous but cold, rather pompous. I attended the meetings less and less. Breton used to say, "*Cher ami*, we don't see you often." After a year we had to sign a new manifesto, and I didn't. The manifesto was called *Rupture Inaugurale*, and indeed a *rupture* it was for me. But I was wrong not to try and see Breton again, which I learned later he would have welcomed and who is still, in my view, one of the masters of this century's poetry. In fact, being locked up in his role as the leader of surrealism made him suffer. I was wrong, through shyness, and arrogance.

INTERVIEWER

So you arrived in Paris under the Occupation. How did you earn a living?

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BONNEFOY

I matriculated at the Sorbonne in the school of sciences and the school of law to get degrees. It was a pretext for being in Paris, and I didn't finish my courses. I continued studying mathematics for two or three years, following my own path rather than the set curriculum. In truth I stopped my university studies, and my family was worried. There was a "crammer", which prepared pupils for the baccalauréat, and they offered me a job teaching mathematics. It was on the condition that I also taught the natural science, about which I knew little. So I would study blood circulation or the morphology of insects the night before and the next day I would pour out my "knowledge" into the pupils—it worked!

The place was a dingy apartment with just a corridor between the classrooms. In 1944 I could have been called up for what was known as "compulsory labor" in Germany. I planned to escape and hide in a farm if they came for me, as many young men did. Fortunately the war ended before I was called.

INTERVIEWER

For a while you were also taken by Éluard's poetry. He was the favorite poet of my generation too, up to the 1960s. We thought he was the poet of love, and celebrated his women. Reading him recently, I was much less moved. Were you influenced by him?

BONNEFOY

In 1942 Éluard's *Selected Poems* was published. It was his best book because the selection was made by himself, and beautifully. It influenced me in the sense that it tempered the influences of Baudelaire and Valéry. Éluard's limpid images helped me to imagine a simpler, more fluid, more luminous poetry. But you are right, he has not aged well. His poetry has come down in my esteem as well, because of its facility.

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INTERVIEWER

I know you don't like Aragon—no one likes his politics—but his war poems, don't you find them powerful and moving?

BONNEFOY

Oh yes, of course, we were all moved by a few lines like, *"Je reste roi de mes douleurs."* But the poems dedicated to his wife Else Triolet seemed to me terribly insincere and declamatory, exhibiting the worst aspects of some romantic poetry. In fact his work, a mixture of unconditional Stalinism and an imitation of popular sentimentality, was reactionary.

In politics I was rather a Trotskyite, which only meant that I had read *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*, the manifesto Trotsky had written with Breton during the latter's journey to Mexico. It stood for revolution on the one hand, and on the other the freest, most nocturnal poetic experimentation. Hence the title of a little magazine I edited with friends: *La Révolution La Nuit*. It had only two issues, and we did not dare to ask Breton to contribute.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start your study of philosophy? I ask this because philosophy is important for the understanding of your oeuvre in its entirety—it underpins all aspects of your work.

BONNEFOY

While I was at the lycée I followed the course of philosophy as well as sciences for the second half of my baccalauréat. I was interested in epistemology, logic and the history of ideas. Later I read the works of Bachelard—not his meditations on poetry, but his theoretical books on physics and scientific methodology. I had also started reading Kierkegaard and quite by chance Chestov. When I arrived in Paris a very cultivated man who had a marvelous library—philosophy, ethnology, the Sophists, the great Indian and Chinese thinkers—gave me free access to it. Thanks to his generosity I discovered what the university does not give one: at the university one is given

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a book that is supposed to be the best preparation for the exam, it does not give one an idea of the immense variety of the past exploration of the subject. While reading through my friend's library I discovered the Greeks, and read Jean Wahl's *Les Études Kierkegaardiennes*.

At the time I was teaching at the "crammer" and was very poor. I lived in a little hotel on Quai Saint-Michel, near Notre-Dame, trying to work and understand things. My sister worked in the secretary's office of the Sorbonne, and one day she found me a little job there. It meant that I could go to any lecture I wanted, take as many leaves as I wished, and apply for research grants which allowed me to travel. For example I applied for and was granted a scholarship to travel in Italy for a few months and study Piero della Francesca. Two other travelling grants took me to Holland—I was interested in the Dutch engraver Hercules Seghers—and to London in 1950.

At the same time I attended Jean Wahl's and Jean Hyppolite's philosophy courses. I liked Jean Wahl very much, the man and the oeuvre. I did a degree in philosophy with him, and wrote a little thesis on Baudelaire and Kierkegaard. Meanwhile I had also published some poetry, which interested him, as he wrote poetry himself, both in French and in English.

INTERVIEWER

Meanwhile you published individual poems in various reviews, then in 1953, your first book of poems, *Du Mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve (On the Motion and Immobility of Douve)*. How did it come about? Was it hard to find a publisher?

BONNEFOY

Fortunately not, for I was hardly ready to look for one. It seemed to me that the sort of poetry I wanted to write could appeal only to a few people, and that the simplest way was to publish it myself. But there was a bookshop in rue de l'Odéon which belonged to Adrienne Monnier, who had been a friend of writers since World War I—Valéry, Claudel,

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Breton, and many more. On the opposite side of the street was Sylvia Beach's English bookshop, Shakespeare and Company, and the two women had championed English and German writers as well—Hemingway, Walter Benjamin, and of course James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* was first published by Sylvia Beach in the original English and by Monnier in French translation.

Adrienne Monnier and her salesman Maurice Saillet had the kindness to be interested in my beginnings. So when in 1946 I published my poem *"Traité du pianiste"* at my own expense, they put it on the table of recommended books—next to *Ulysses*! Three years later Adrienne Monnier was put in charge of a poetry collection at Mercure de France, and she asked me to contribute a book. It became *Du Mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*. By the time it was published in 1953, Adrienne had closed her book shop, and soon after, she killed herself.

INTERVIEWER

You had immediate recognition and were suddenly in the middle of the current of contemporary poetry. Your subsequent books enjoyed the same attention and appreciation. At the same time you began to write critical essays on poetry and art. In this you joined a great tradition of poet-critics, including Baudelaire. What inclined you towards criticism?

BONNEFOY

I wanted to understand what was poetry, and how should one write so that it could respond once again to the demands of the century. This line of thought had already engaged surrealism—which was in fact more theory than practice—and that is why I had been attracted to it. But to reflect upon poetry meant having to think about the great poets, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, those who had founded modernism in France. It was also tackling the question of creativity in general, hence my interest in painters. The next step was thinking of great philosophers, and of the important moments of religious experience.

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INTERVIEWER

Bachelard does a sort of personal meditation on the booklets he receives, and it becomes his own poetic work.

BONNEFOY

Exactly. That is why I have the sympathy for him which one can only have for someone engaged upon some sort of poetic creation. Here you're making a distinction between writing verse and *poetry*. Exactly. The loss of immediacy, of unity. For poetry can only be a partial approach, which substitutes for the object a simple image and for (our feelings) a verbal expression—thereby losing the intimate experience. On the other hand there is nothing *before* language, for there is no consciousness, and therefore no world, without a system of signs. In fact, it is the speaking-being that has created this universe, even if language excludes him from it. This means that we are deprived through words of an authentic intimacy with what we are, or with what the Other is. We need poetry, not to regain this intimacy, which is impossible, but to remember that we miss it and to prove to ourselves the value of those moments when we are able to encounter other people, or trees, or anything, *beyond words*, in silence.

INTERVIEWER

Let us move on to poetic form. In an essay on translation you have written that free verse is the only form capable of expressing what you wish to write, and that the old formal prosody is no longer viable. Unfortunately, while free verse has liberated certain poetic geniuses from metric constraints, it has also opened the floodgates to a great deal of nonsense, even charlatanism. Don't you still feel that some formal discipline is necessary?

BONNEFOY

I discussed the problem of free verse in the context of traditional French prosody. It is true that today regular meter is no longer practicable. This is doubtless because the French

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language does not have stressed syllables, so that our prosody is based on the *number* of syllables. This means that our regular meters are conventional forms, whose *raison d'être* was to allow poets to demonstrate a certain unity of thought, of feeling. This unity has now disappeared from society, since religion no longer controls people's minds. Regular verse disappeared around the time when Nietzsche wrote, "God is dead." Valéry was perhaps the only great poet to use it in the twentieth-century. In France, we look at it as an anachronism. Yet we haven't lost anything, for on the one hand no one had waited for liberation from the constraints of prosody to write bad poetry; on the other hand free verse is not the rejection of prosodic laws, indeed the reverse! These laws have always existed, and real poets have always obeyed them. What characterized regular prosody was the obligation to submit to certain conventional rules that in no way enhanced our capacity of listening to those more profound laws. In fact, rhymes, alliterations, assonances, all the materials of poetic form can be employed today as they were before—perhaps even better. I completely agree with you that poetry is also a formal use of language. Indeed, only form allows us to hear the tone of the words, and it is precisely because verse is sonorous reality that words in it are no longer subject to the sole authority of conceptual thought. This enables us to perceive reality otherwise than through language. Form in poetry silences the conceptual meaning of words; it is therefore the condition of the direct gaze upon the world.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that poetry today has become too opaque, too incomprehensible?

BONNEFOY

There have always been obscure, hermetic poets: Nerval, Maurice Scève, even Dante, as well as others whose obscurity is hidden beneath a clear surface. People have always questioned the texts of even the most easily read poets—Homer

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and Vergil—in order to discover, through allegory, perhaps, their hidden meanings.

On the other hand the obscurity of a contemporary poet is not necessarily a defect which one would need to discard: in certain cases it is a matter of consciousness about what poetic discourse is in a society like ours. You see, in antiquity, in the Middle Ages, in Europe until the French Revolution, there was a body of beliefs, of religious representation, rituals and moral values that were accepted by everyone. This allowed poets to refer to them and be understood without having to explain their thoughts in a didactic fashion, that is against the natural, spontaneous movement of poetic writing. Since the eighteenth century this system of references, this unity of thought, has been dismantled. John Donne had already had the premonition that henceforth there would be as many worldviews as there are individuals. When one wants to be profoundly oneself, which is the case in a poem, one puts oneself on a plane that is at least partly incommunicable to others. It is better to accept this than to pretend otherwise.

For example I have used the word *safre*, which means sandstone in the idiom of a particular region of southern France that is unknown to nearly all my readers, but which is part of a very important moment in my life. This is a way of recalling that when writing one is not trying to explain the meaning of one's own words to oneself.

Having said that, the very function of poetry is to be as universal as possible, and that demands that we rectify, simplify, enlarge our lived experience, so that our words have properties that make them on the whole comprehensible and lived anew: the reader must understand that what is obscure in the poem proves that words should not be reduced to a game of concepts, which in turn would engender ideology, death. It is not a question of understanding a poem concept by concept, for that would mean tearing it away from its basis, which is not thought but experience.

When at sixteen I first read certain poems of Rimbaud and Pierre Jean Jouve, I understood nothing. Yet I was completely

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won over, held. I relived those words, and thanks to them learned to think and to live differently, more intensely; it was as if a light shone through them. I regained my trust in words.

You may object to certain poems whose obscurity you think covers a void of experience. Well, they will be forgotten!

INTERVIEWER

How does a poem come to you? Is it something that is given, that comes from the outside? Or is it something that you provoke within? Is there a grit that produces the pearl, or is it you who produce the grit that produces the pearl?

BONNEFOY

Nothing has ever been given to me. I do not know a situation in which a poem has been dictated by an "inspiration," that it has been preceded by the feeling or the thought it's going to express. What is usual for me is the desire to find myself once again within a specifically poetic idiom. For this to happen it is necessary that words come to my mind free from the conceptual network that is present and active in ordinary speech. Can this happen? Yes, when the relation one might perceive between words defies analysis, as in what the surrealists called the *image:* thus "Villages of Weariness" or "The crow wise be reborn redder than ever," two lines by Éluard which can't be reduced by the play of metonymies or metaphors. At the same time these word associations, which are the beginning of poetic labor, must not be gratuitous, unrelated to personal reality. I have to expect them from my unconscious speech, which luckily appears as soon as one summons it by putting pen to paper, bringing verbal fragments which are at once enigmatic and rich with my past, my unknown present, and my future.

So I jot down these sentences. I listen to them. I see them making signs to each other, and thanks to them I begin to understand needs, memories, fantasies which are within me. This is the beginning of the poem, which will eventually become a whole book, since it will concern all that I am. I have always started in this way, in the middle of the unknown,

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only to discover later that I was speaking from the point that would have been the simple observation of my daily actions and thoughts. This is a labor that requires a great deal of time, years perhaps. Often the title comes at the end, like a retroactive statement.

INTERVIEWER

You decide that you're going to write a poem and you jot down the sounds and words. Do the words come first and the idea afterward?

BONNEFOY

Yes. What shapes the poem, what makes it what it is . . . that depends on causes which are within me already, and have been for a long time, although I am not yet aware of them. I will understand them only once the work is finished.

I must point out that I can postpone the decision to start writing for years. It's when I'm at peace with the thoughts and the images that are generated by the previous book. I will not start writing again except when I notice that the last book is no longer sufficient to express or order my relationship with the world. Hence the title of one of my books, "What Was Without Light" (published in English as *In the Shadow's Light*). To some extent it means: here it is, what was not illuminated in the last poem is now confronted and clarified.

INTERVIEWER

A number of writers use something as a stimulant. Is there anything that stimulates your writing? For example, a special room in your house?

BONNEFOY

I would simply say the light. The light of the day, of the sky. Light is a perceptible unity. When there is more light around you, you are more alert to the world's situations, to its different aspects, to the mystery of time.

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INTERVIEWER

Does this mean that you go to places where there is more light, like the south of France? Do you pursue light?

BONNEFOY

I would like to. It is true that I like those regions of the world where light is more intense. I love Provence also, if not above all, for its light. Unfortunately, Paris is less luminous than America; the light there is better for painters.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why you have written some of your most beautiful poems here, on the East Coast, in New England?

BONNEFOY

Yes. Because of the light, because of the snow. The snow is a form of light. I wrote my last book of poetry, *Beginning and End of Snow*, with the memories and images of autumns and winters in New England.

INTERVIEWER

And do you write longhand or do you use the new word processors?

BONNEFOY

No word processors! I use a little typewriter; at the same time, often on the same page, I write by hand. The old typewriter makes the paper more present, still a part of oneself. What appears on the screen of a word processor is a mist; it's somewhere else.

INTERVIEWER

Let us move on to another aspect of your poetry, your translations of Shakespeare and Yeats. When did you learn English?

BONNEFOY

I studied English at the lycée, but in a limited and bookish way. After I finished my baccalauréat I was interested in the

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philosophy of science and I tried to read Bertrand Russell. Then I became fascinated by Italian art and architecture, and I began to read English art-historians: John Pope-Hennessy on Paolo Uccello, Kenneth Clark on Piero della Francesca, and others. They were the discoveries of a short stay in London in 1950, made possible by a grant. I had also started to read Donne, Marvell and Eliot. Then in 1954 Pierre Jean Jouve, to whom I had sent my first book of poems, introduced me to Pierre Leyris, our great translator of Melville, Hopkins, Eliot, Emily Brontë. He was starting a vast bilingual collection of Shakespeare with a team of translators, and he invited me to take part in the project. I accepted enthusiastically, and he gave me a few scenes from *Julius Caesar* to have a go at. Pleased with what I had done, he gave me the whole play, plus *Hamlet*, *Henry IV*, *The Winter's Tale* and the poems. I was delighted. I submerged myself in English critical editions and lexicons, not wishing to see any existing French translation. So when I went to America in 1958 I knew Elizabethan English better than the contemporary idiom—you were lucky if I didn't use *multitudinous* or *incarnadine* instead of *many* or *red*.

INTERVIEWER

Was that reading of the critical editions the beginning of your interest in Anglo-American literary criticism?

BONNEFOY

Not really. There was another reason for that. At the beginning of the fifties I had gone back to my study of philosophy, and I planned to write a doctoral dissertation. My tutor was Jean Wahl, who was very kind to me and wanted to help me. As he had lived in the United States during the war and knew American criticism, he suggested that I put my thesis aside for a while. He found me a job as a researcher at the National Center for Scientific Research for a preliminary study of New Criticism and the philosophy of literary creativity in the English language. I spent three years at the NCSR reading I.A. Richards, R.P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, etc. . . . I then

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produced a paper on the relationship between French and English criticism, which *Encounter* magazine published in 1958, just before my first trip to America. I was invited to take part in a seminar at Harvard, and when I arrived in Cambridge, I discovered to my amazement that I was considered a respectable specialist—thanks to a little column in *The Times Literary Supplement* about my *Encounter* article! It seemed a misunderstanding, but it enabled me to form some lasting friendships. Since then I have been back frequently.

INTERVIEWER

There was a long gap between your Shakespeare plays and your translation of Yeats's shorter poems published three years ago. Why Yeats?

BONNEFOY

Because I consider him to be one of the greatest poets of the West. It is not that I don't like Eliot. Indeed I'm deeply attached to *The Waste Land* and the poem about the Magi. I like Eliot's ability to live so personally, so touchingly, the great metaphysical problems of our century, the inner exile, the alienation between man and woman. But Yeats, with his desires, furies, intuitions, prophetic emphases, myths, intense oddities and his superb verse (in my view unrivalled since Shakespeare) enthralls me even more.

INTERVIEWER

Eliot touched the existential malaise of our age, but it was the way he used the language as much as what he said that set the tone and opened out onto new horizons. He was influenced by French poets—Jules Laforgue and Guillaume Apollinaire particularly. Do you see their imprint on his poetry from this side?

BONNEFOY

Not really. Eliot was religious, even pious, Protestant and Puritan, and Laforgue was almost the opposite: atheist, ex-

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tremely sensual, full of tenderness yet cynical, concerned with opening his writing to the whispers of the unconscious, especially in his great prose work *Moralités légendaires*, one of the most beautiful books of our literature.

What Eliot liked in Laforgue was the presence of the quotidian within a lyrical poem, which is natural for an English poet who is used to Shakespeare and Donne. He could not have found this fusion of the poetic and the trivial in Racine, Mallarmé, or Baudelaire. Perhaps Eliot liked Apollinaire because he is more accessible than the ones I have just mentioned—although a great poet. Often—perhaps too often—French poetry is an experiment not on the situations of life, but on language, which it wishes to change in order to renew the world. It works on the verbal instrument. This is true not only of our poets but also of many prose writers. French writers question their language while using it in order to understand or describe reality. Thus they create a sort of limited association within society.

INTERVIEWER

Gide says in the preface to his *Anthology of French Poetry* that there is an English poetry, but no French poetry, only French poets.

BONNEFOY

Literature and poetry are not synonymous. But there is a strong tie between French poets since Villon and Chrétien de Troyes down to the present. When I myself write essays on Baudelaire, Nerval, Mallarmé, Laforgue, it is not just to speak about them with their readers, but also to speak *with them*. I have a feeling that a discussion is taking place about the object and method of poetry, and that I have the right to take part in it.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps that is why one hears the sentence, "I don't like French poetry," from some people who know the language and read French prose.

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BONNEFOY

One can believe that French poetry is for the intellect rather than for the emotions, the heart. But that is just an appearance. It is not a question of revelling in a hermetic language exclusive to a few insiders, but of breaking down stereotypes which no longer give an authentic representation of reality, only a superficial one, and therefore do not allow real exchanges. Of course, as you say, it opens the door to imposters, who simulate the real work in order to intimidate the reader.

INTERVIEWER

Poetry is particularly difficult to translate. Robert Frost said that poetry is what gets lost in translation. Do you agree?

BONNEFOY

I would be the first to say that poetry is untranslatable. But the desire to translate a poem is already participation in it, and perhaps one can recreate something similar in one's own language. What is essential is not to pursue certain mirages, such as trying to preserve in French the rhymes and prosody of the original poem. I took great liberties with Yeats in this respect. On the other hand Yeats is so universal that it is easy to re-live a part of his emotions, even if the situations which produced them are not familiar. How many of his poems one feels in the depths of one's being: "The Second Coming," "Sailing to Byzantium," "Coole Park" and "Coole and Ballylee."

INTERVIEWER

You are a part of the tradition of French poet-critics from Diderot to Baudelaire and have written that painters have a more immediate perception of reality than poets, who have to break through the barrier of words first. Isn't music even more immediate?

BONNEFOY

That is very true. Music is very important to me. It is an essential part of poetic writing, since in poetry the words are

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also sounds, with accents and rhythms. But I have hardly written about music, because I don't know the technical aspects of the musician's work and language. I have, however, written an essay on listening to the sonorities and sounds in Baudelaire's poetry.

INTERVIEWER

Will you continue to teach and to write? How do you manage doing both?

BONNEFOY

For the past twelve years the Collège de France has been a constant source of stimulation, for I have to teach a new course every year; as a a result I have come to study and, I hope, better understand Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and a few other writers and artists. By the same token it could have been in conflict with writing poetry. I don't know if it has hampered it—I would say not. But it is writing verse which always calls me back again. I need to have a long period free, during which I can listen to the voices that come from the deepest unconscious—which know more than we do about life and death.

INTERVIEWER

Your energy and variety of output is astonishing. One hesitates to talk about death, but it is a subject you tackle in your poetry. Is it because poetry, like love, is a way of transcending death?

BONNEFOY

Death is what conceptual language represents negatively, like a hole, a void, but poetic speech can invert this, make it positive. I agree with you. Since thanks to poetry the world is closer, and its unity more perceptible, we feel more part of that unity: like the leaf of a tree, even if it falls off the branch, in an instant that is eternal. So what is death? But I have to add that all this is true only in theory. Poetry would be just

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that—transcending death—if it were not inaccessible; we can only try to approach it. That is why one should not call oneself a poet. It would be pretentious. It would mean that one has resolved the problems poetry presents. *Poet* is a word one can use when speaking of others, if one admires them sufficiently. If someone asks me what I do, I say I'm a critic, or a historian.

—**Shusha Guppy**

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Portfolio

Drawings

Lee Tribe

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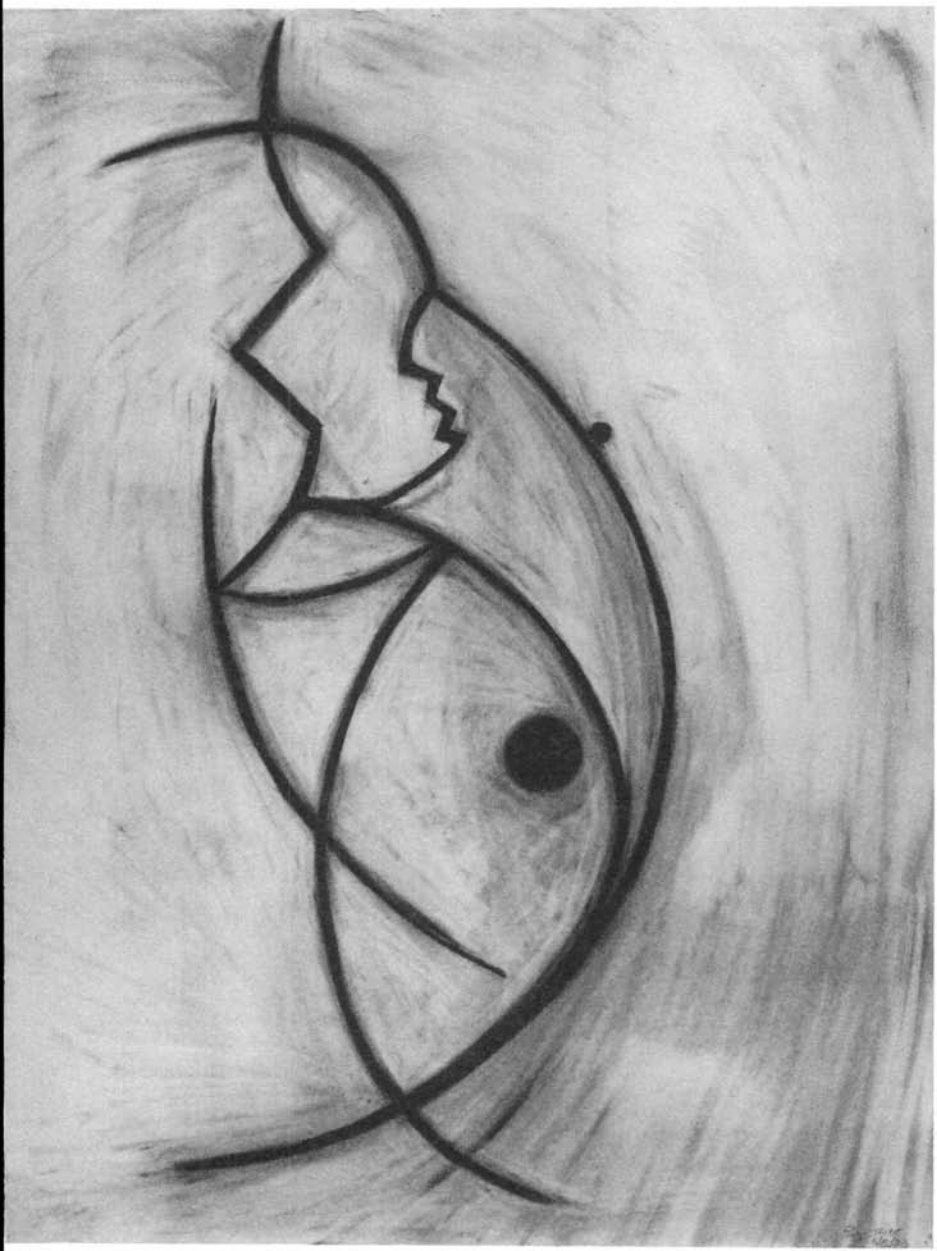

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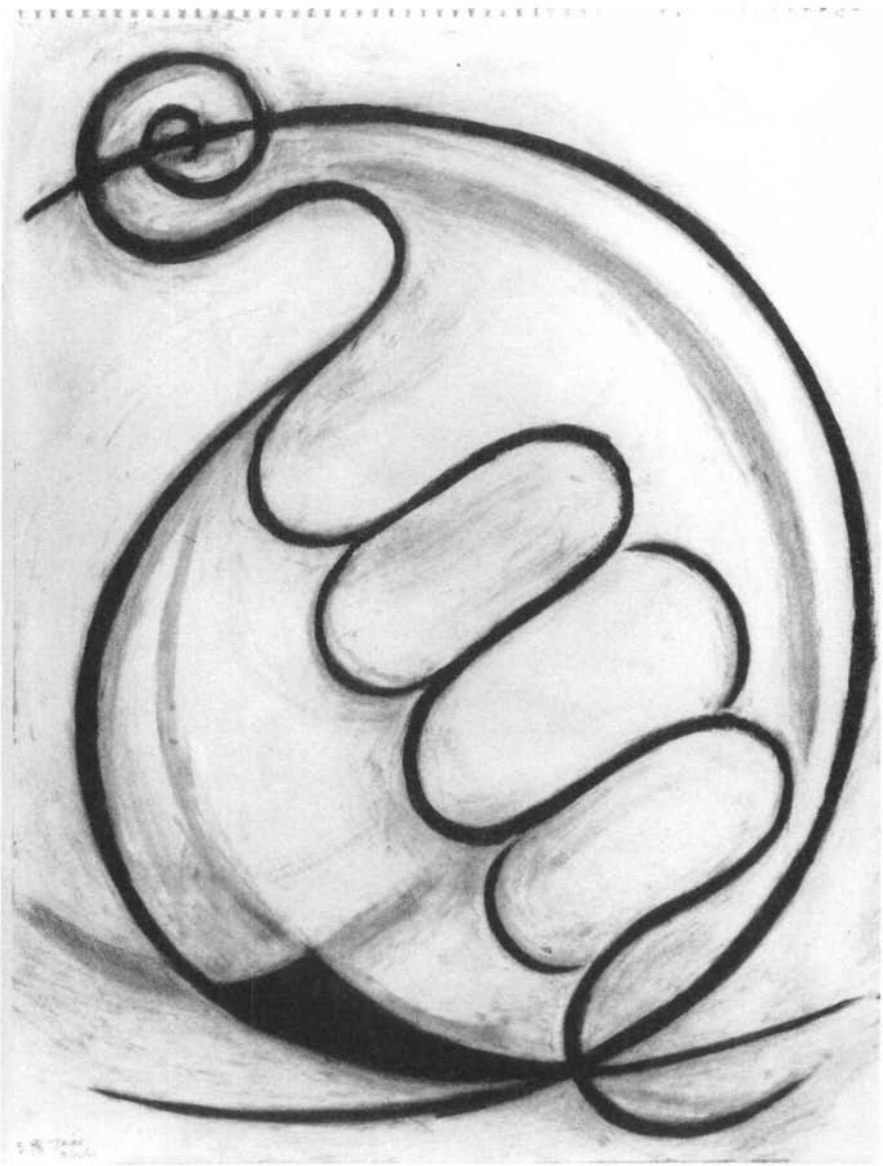

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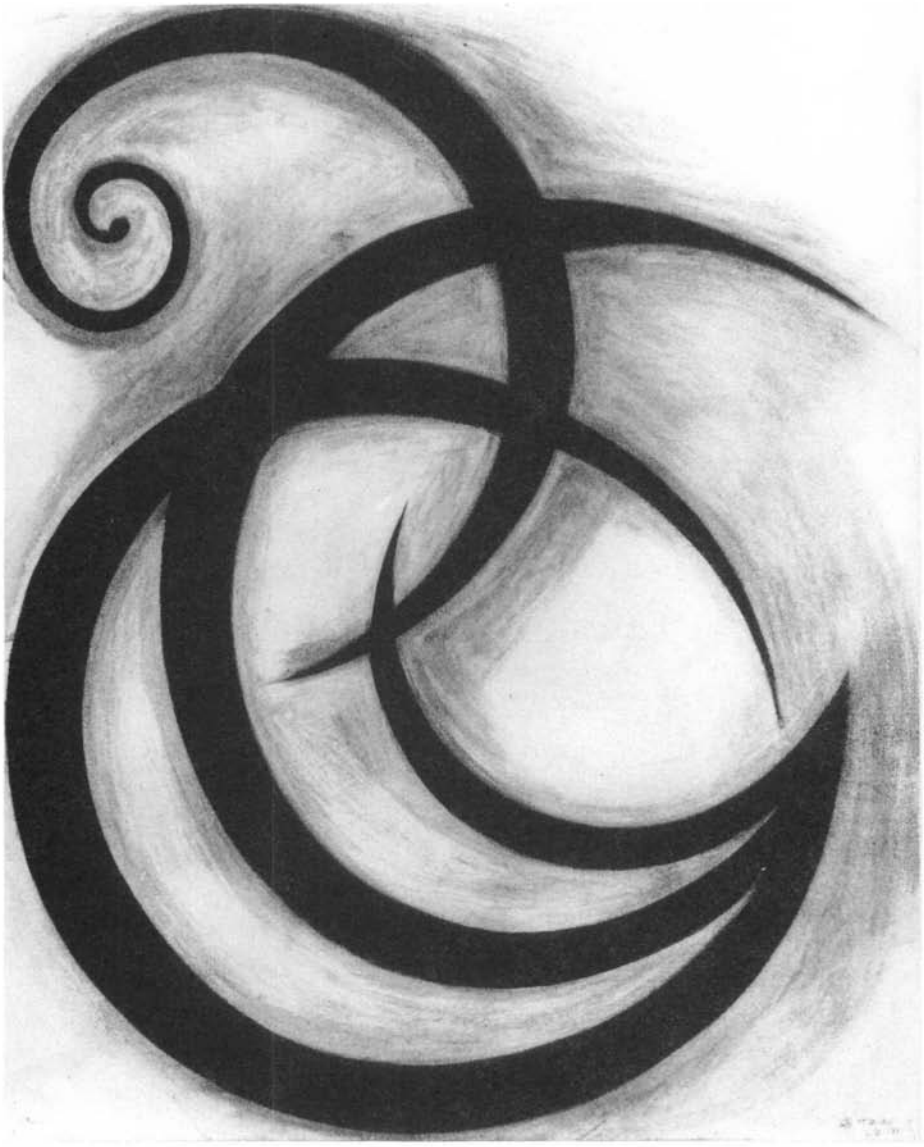

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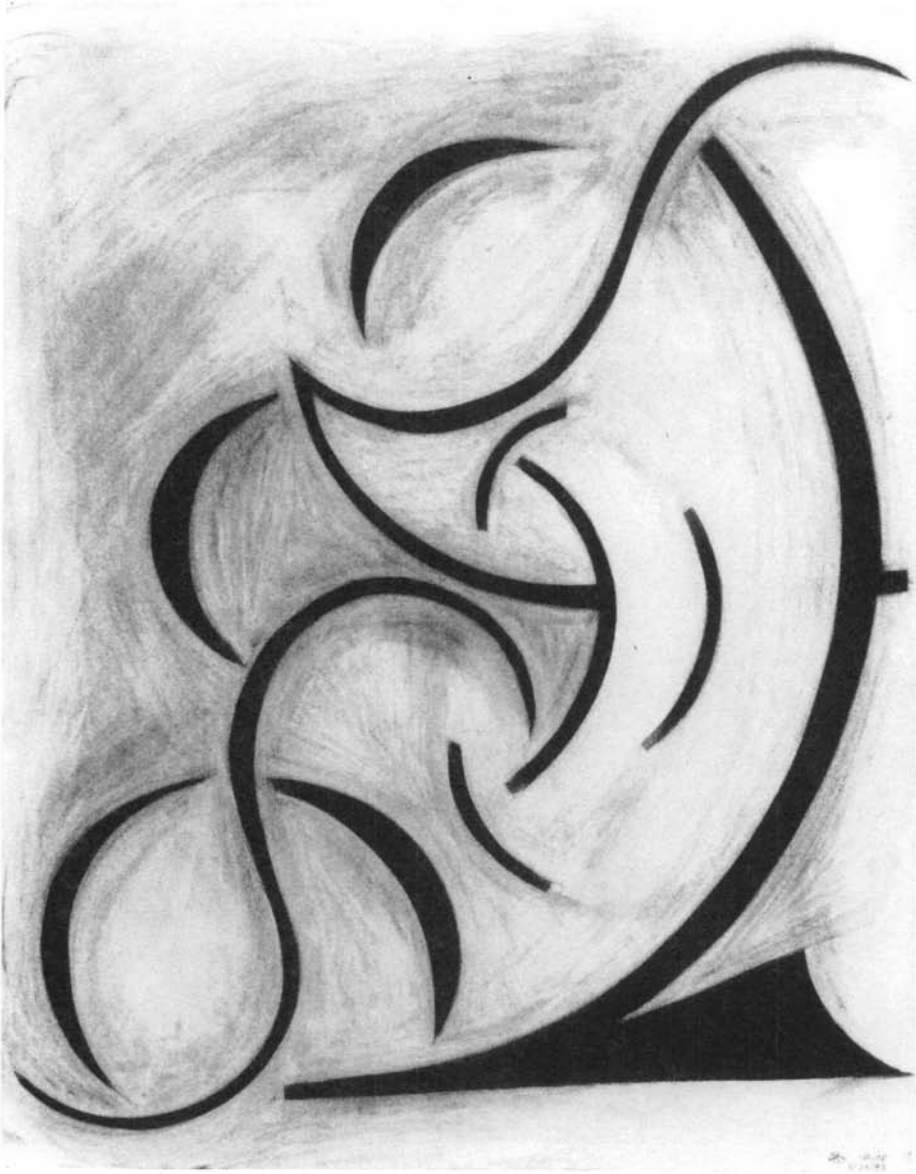

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Two Poems by Ingeborg Bachmann

In Apulia

Under the olive trees the light pours out its seeds,
poppies appear and begin to flicker,
burning the oil that feeds their fire;
it's a light that never recedes.

Drums inside cavernous cities drum their endless beat,
white bread and the lips still blackened,
manger cribs that are filled with children,
these attract the flies that feed.

If the light of fields revealed the prehistoric,
poppies would smoke inside the lanterns,
pain would consume their sleeping forms,
till its burning was exhausted.

Donkeys would rise to carry water over the land,
hands would embroider lacy curls,
adorning the walls with glass and pearls—
passages for the tinkling of raimant.

Children are nursed by madonnas, and the buffalo roam
munching green grass, smoke in their horns;
finally worthy gifts are borne:
snake eggs, fish, blood of the lamb.

Finally the stones crush fruit, the waiting jugs are fired.
Oil drops float like eyes on water,
poppies sink, drunken, as they falter,
overrun by deadly spiders.

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Letter in Two Drafts

Rome in November evening many thanks
the smooth marble reef the cold tile-faces
the spray of lights before the gate closes
the sound that frozen glasses make when shattering
the singsong tune that from guitars keeps wringing
before more heads and tails into coins are pressed
down at the coliseum with lances of cypress!
the woodworm sits beside me at the table—
how juicy a leaf looks that caterpillars nibble?
and autumn in a land of fog the gaudy tatters
of forests that are soaked by great rain showers
whether it be a screech owl's longing for death
the dragons that in the marsh's warmth perish
the blackened sail the ominous call of ravens
the north wind over the water deviating
the ghostly ship the hillsides and the meadows
buried under rubble the house the willows
penniless and weeping at the stream of coffins
its madness from the depths they keep recovering
Forever and No More mixed as a single drink
your pained heart glorifying every sorrow
destroyed completely lost lovesick you sink . . .

Roman nights in November harmonious and quiet
the good-bye without insult has been accomplished
the eyes by a pure luminescence have been brushed
the columns shoot up out of tamarinds
Oh the sky through which the blue tones wind!
petals are landing in the middle of fountains
like light rose-steps they continue turning
sensuously the cats stretch out their claws
sleep has seized hold of a last falling star
the mouth escapes any kisses without a scratch
the silken slipper is not harmed by glass
the wine sinks fast through fading twilight thoughts

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the light leaps up once more with its bright claws
embraces ages past flings them into today
up hillsides roar the hordes of cars at bay
around the temples antennas are parading
receiving morning's chorus amid the blazing
for every market cry of prices birds calling
into pavement horse hooves dip their mirror writing
chrysanthemums are what fill up the graves instead
sea breeze and mountain wind mix aromas and tears
I'm in the midst of it—what do you expect?

—translated from the German
by Peter Filkins

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Three Poems by Ben Downing

The Object

> *. . . celui qui trouve son emploi dans la contemplation d'une pierre verte . . .*
> —St.-John Perse

He who finds his business in the slow,
persistent study of one green stone,
even a plain one chosen, let us say,
from a plenitude of greater green;

and who, in choosing green, abandons blue
to its own scholar, snubs all reds, rejects
the dark persuasions of persistent black;
and whose choice of stone as well reflects

the surface of a world neglected—not
without pain, but without regret—of things
crying out their equal worth, their need
to have their facets noted, diamond rings

and the humblest wooden chair alike
in the futile clamor of the claims they make
upon the student, who, studying his one
green stone, considers that, and that alone.

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The Weather

A scattering of mind (like rain
flung out small and squalled
against the random panes
attention turns to in its hunt
for some lasting fascination
that will hold its gaze and not allow
a second scene to come and slide
its heart away) is hard to stay
and even harder to abide.

Hiroshima without Adjectives

after John Hersey

The panic grass is pushing up
serenity into an air
that has at last regained its pale.

Above the burn, the feverfew,
the goosefoot stepping into view
among the Spanish bayonets.

The epicenter's blank is filled
as sickle senna radiates
its ardor outward to the world.

The painter's shadow pressed against
the wall he worked, his ladder too,
his brush about to dip the paint.

There is another man with a cart,
the space between his horse and whip,
and all the morning glories growing there.

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Caroline Knox

Kilim

A a
mammo pappo
gram gram
hands on hips, feet in stirrups
indignant (India? + ignis)
ha ha hands on hips, *prêt à porter*
What this scarab allows to that ankh
we are not to know. What effect the isms
of X or Mohammed or the Buddha
had and/or have (for that matter) on or in
the flat motif of kilim rugs
we are not to know, but it's not abstract:

a at
Gany Runny
mede mede
sporting a bedspread or a soccer-coach costume
with a half-line in the half-light with a half-life

A lion swiftly still
soars and stands so
A tree high still
of life and wide soars
Meanwhile back at the oasis, the ecstatic ones
partake of desert dessert, by the dignified drama dairy

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Cathleen Calbert

In Praise of my Young Husband

I know why all the old men want young
girls, why the other old men love young
boys, for I see how they are like
the young girls (since I have whispered
into your pink ears, my dear, and stroked
your Chatterton pale chest, the soft bowl

of your Botticelli belly), and I know why
men leave their old wives, wives their
old husbands, why women love their men,
why women love their women, for at times
you seem to me a young Cathleen, your
almond eyes, smooth thighs, white cheeks.

I know why mothers do so love their
sons, and daughters their good fathers,
and why a bed is a good, good thing (as
are down pillows, quilts, clean sheets),
why heterosexuals believe they've found
a perfect symmetry of difference, why

homosexuals believe they've found a perfect
balance of mirroring, why young lovers
like to drink too much and make a drunken,
careless love, why couples always cook
so much, and our lips dip in that slippery
curve, why the rest can seem like nothing

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more than a morning lie we tell ourselves
so we will leave our beds and keep up
an interest in our professional lives,
why many must make a dangerous love
and threaten these professional lives,
why all lovers will give it one more try,

why we are finally willing to fail,
why we will still let ourselves fall
in love, why I, surely old enough
(a cautious friend kindly implies)
to know better, can think of nothing
better than the buoyancy of your body.

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Two Poems by John Drury

The Center of the Block

Hudsons and Studebakers ruled the streets,
a crossing guard and teenagers the pavement
when I was eight. But that was an improvement
on indoors, a domain of grunts and threats.

One way out went up, skyward, on steep roofs
where we clattered on corrugated tin
or gripped crumbling shingles and stared at the sun,
until a call to scat down cuffed our laughs.

We had to shimmy down the drainpipes, hop
on the slick decks of sailboats on their trailers
and, skulking off, out of the range of callers,
reaching the center of the block, escape.

The boundaries dwindled to a row of wickets
or a wire fence twisted and bent and pulled
up from a channel clawed in earth. We crawled
underneath and squeezed through, dirt in our pockets.

The bushes, vines, limbs, underbrush, and creepers
were ours, a lodge for the diminutive,
and summer passed in coolness through the cove,
until we rose, pants brushed off, checking our zippers.

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Summer Jobs

1. Motor Lodge

"So this is it, experience," I thought,
lugging tin buckets from the ice machines
to rooms of real adults, with cigarettes
and drinks in plastic cups and proffered coins.

I reached out for their blessing, but the tips
were nothing next to rumpled, unmade beds
at four in the afternoon, women in slips
and men in T-shirts as the TV played.

Down in the laundry room, I counted sheets,
stunned by the musk that vanished in the wash,
and balled up soggy towels that down the chutes
exploded, reeking. Before the evening rush,

avid and timid for what I glimpsed at work,
I left, hanging my gold vest on a hook.

2. Drive-In Restaurant

The money was so bad, I came in early
to wipe hard mustard off the microphones
and lit-up menus in the parking lot.
Each time I took an order, I forgot
something they had to have: two extra spoons,
a moistened napkin, hot sauce for the chili.

I was the oddball who didn't speak Persian,
who hadn't flown the ocean, who hadn't fought
with knives behind a warehouse in the slums,
who hadn't learned to balance trays on palms,

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who hadn't lost a relative or built
wire traps to capture animals for rations.
After the after-movie crowd peeled out,
I picked up litter from each parking spot.

3. Apartment Complex

"John Slow" they called me, when I worked outdoors,
hauling lawn mowers up a steep incline,
heaving "sod clods" off trucks, buffing the floors
of vacated apartments. By design,
I didn't hurry undertaking tasks
like weeding the rock garden, scrubbing walls
where mildew blackened, piling up old desks.
It all seeped deeper in my overalls.

They said I looked like Rudolph Valentino
because of my slicked-back hair. Because I was silent?
Sweeping the stairs, I stopped when a piano
echoed above the cool well where dust gathered.
Loafing, the boss said, is your only talent—
and the sod we planted on the hard earth withered.

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Four Poems by Geoffrey H. Hartman

Night Thoughts East

Jerusalem, 1988

Gunnery practise dubs the Judean hills.
Anna Ticho stopped painting for many years.
Her eyes a still small voice, eroded
canvas-lines and clumps. They scour and score
drought. Horeb. Stony tulips in March,
wild impossible eyries. Vultures above.

We walk miles to see Ain Ovdat's shy
ibexes, or black iris miracle
inching from spring and rock. Like trees
and houses on a first visit nineteen-fifty-two.
My cousin said: this was built last year
this planted a month ago. A dreamer
was I, mouth full of hope and laughter.

Once again amid the rejoicing I am a mourner,
Ben-Gurion's diary notes, the eve of Independence.
I lift my eyes to the cliffs at Sde Boker.
The Herut convention goes mad, Sharon, Sharon,
Melech Yisrael!

For twenty-five years,
he says, I was unable to write about it,
I could not speak the name of my hometown.
(You must drink, she says, it's a treacherous climate.)
This land will rebuild us. I took
the name of a kibbutz. Do you remember
clearing a field with stones as big as gourds?

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There are no more bargains in the bedouin market.
Bad silver, bad jewelry, bait. *My shop*
is Sinai. Welcome. There's nothing I want
here: even the courtesy is faked. Rumors
rouse the political city close to Purim.

Curfew

for Aharon Appelfeld

For him it is always a Shabbat
of words. Fire is forbidden:
even the memory of ashes.
The word fire disturbs
the unpronounceable name. In the past
it was already past, shards.
They misheard, but kept asking.
Quarrelsome echoes lingered, these
and these. Brazen guesses
combined what survived, sly
vowelings. Do not read
but read, they said. We
cannot presume that way:
it would be, as it were,
eating on Sinai, or
licking the presence with words.

A double loaf on Shabbat
is also too much: the knife
passed over, and hoards it.
So reticence is paid out
crumb by crumb; sitting in cafés,
or wandering between beach and street.
Later he smuggles ends of speech

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as if illegal again, and tainted by
a surprising power. The small voice,
Jewish, unheroic, a curse
among virile and exalted traders.
Who spoke and the world was not.
He still eats bread like salt.

Words

My voice bends over your neck.
There, to the small of the back
mouth mutes its touch.
The lips are too open, poems.
Whose voice inflects my voice?
Without light but also without night
I write, against all the pleasures
You have as having had:
the unpunctual word but a caress
a semicolon, say, or three
dots drifting, touching sleep . . .

No, it will not wake again
another time. The first was,
and took away, awkward
stumblings by the light
of the great south, phosphors
and lumen metaphors, glassy
limbs of sea over marble:
the clouds and sounds of winds
went; I was in them;
wordless with you
almost wordless . . .

Another time I woke you,
working the negative way

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the dark morning glinted
you wanted pleasure and sleep
the stillness of tempests to come:

but I let the lamp fall
and the light went on rather than out
spilled from blue to white, dawned,
bleaching to day and beyond
"Invent the night" you said.

How can I say, let there be night
how can I say any thing?
You laugh, that I talk a lot,
but no, my mouth dreams
touching blank earth
marking it for a running fire,
a runway of sketches, without
wings, words in sight.

Homecoming

to Germany, in the 1950s

The air is measurable. Clocks
bell, publishing hour on hour
each other's truth, one two, three four:
at leisure through the public square
they wander, flock of air that pours
from valley now and now from sky,
pitching with angelical throat
their timber. My ears are dressed.

Perfumed night almost denies
the pain it rouses.

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Houses lean together, augurers.
Tellers of the setting sun
windows conflagrate.
I wrestle with that gold, I pipe
unreconciled, closing their Argus eyes.

Inscribed in old walls like scars
are sudden steps: a Jacob's ladder
leads minutes to heaven
by the hard heights. I see
roofs at brow level, I see
the town's halo below me:
the darkening corpse that sprouts
spires, a Jesse tree.

Down is easier. Breathing
toward waters ringed at nightfall
by lovers, crooked walls and shouts
lapping the crumbling brick:
there I rest in the shadow of thought,
there I see what I cannot see:
my darkness is not their darkness.

How often have I tried this climb
to an old castle purged by time,
only its name is now erect
and a few relics that bisect
a momentary concert: which
chambers nightly in that niche.
The local band, a windy throng,
moves like a courteous ghost among
charmed Maytime hearers. How long
must I remember, how long
the horror? Can I never sing
of home in my Homeland? Can ode
not speak away that tower of blood?
It cries to heaven, and does not

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die into words. The human word
once more is babble and absurd.

The peacock sigh of the train,
the gulping of trainwheels,
high saw of a motorbike
were my homecoming.
A kind man with warts took the baggage.
The moiety of a dream
still writhed within
to piece itself together.
How could a name, a grave,
bells, and a few trollop images,
hold? I set my face to speak.

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Two Poems by Peggy Penn

Dancing in the Dark

for Nancy Goldberger

Tin cans rolling across the patio
wake me. Creeping downstairs I make a plan—
fling open the door to scare the racoons
when a piece of the darkness separates
itself into a blurry massive shape:
on my lawn there is a bear! *a bear!*
Saliva all over the patio
where he's drooled and strewn four days of garbage.
Striped by moonlight, I watch his snout thrust deep
inside half-grapefruit rinds. He sneezes,

crams his dripping tongue inside a herring jar,
lumbers toward the compost heap and tossing
the matchstick fence over his shoulder
sits on top of the heap: bear so hungry . . .
moonlight caught on crystal tips of fur.
I reach for the phone, *they will shoot him*. . . .
Rearing, he stands upright, swaggering
to the ash tree, beefy haunches plié
up and down, loosening his back in a long rub.
Once his ass is scratched, his penis drops

inches till he pisses, glaring—it lasts
minutes—I abandon the phone, my hand
floats spellbound like an oar on the air.
Between the pointed teeth in wet black gums
saliva rolls down his chest, and I feel
beads of my own sweat moving, uncertainly,
finally looping under my right breast.
Reeling back to the patio he begins

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to dance among the cans, a clattering
paddling sashay step. He turns, head up, through

a confetti of moonlight and I hear
Dancing in the Dark. Beneath a mirrored ball
I dance back, swaying to his brush-step swing,
following his feet, just two on a floe,
a hoodlum freedom in my head, rocking
and stomping, bear on the patio, me
in the kitchen, his secret partner, turning
when he turns, lifting my bosom to him,
kicking my silent cans. Suddenly
he stops, drops down, lurches near my window

as though looking for something lost: a glove
a dance card? Instead he finds the right spot
and shits enough to fill a hubcap, scuffs
to the edge of the dark and disappears.
Outside now, I stand in the smell, the lure
of rotten canteloupe and mango skins
mixed with his steamy sulphurous sweat.
Forbidden Fruit hangs in the air, and love
must be somewhere. I go back up the stairs
and put a blue hibiscus in my hair.

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The Soup

On the day of your scan I make a soup
to wean us from meat. Beans soak and blanch
an hour while I slit open the cell-
ophane wrap on the celery, chopping
the ribs into small pieces, the size
of the stones that follow an avalanche.
Carrots sliced into see-through orange mem-
branes, others hacked into jagged boulders, bi-
sected as though by the pressure of shift-
ing plates. Onions, at knifepoint, suppurate
and toss themselves into the hot oil. What
is left? two blind see-no-evil potatoes.
Sweet herbs; I pull apart ovate leaves
of basil and sweet marjorum. Red kidney
beans slip out of their bladder skins, rubbing
against the Great Limas. Together,
they give off a kind of scum which keeps down
the foaming boil: instead it heaves and
swells, trembling like a bosom, but does not
spill out. Thank God for scum! *I rinse my knife,*
watching its gleaming edge rotate under
the water; now there is only the wait.

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Keeper of the House

Rebecca T. Godwin

"Child, this ain't no place for the likes of you." That's what Ophelia said to me this morning, when I showed her my new room. She comes every morning now to pick up the cartload of laundry those two girls manage to mess up in a night. She's the biggest, strongest, sturdiest woman I ever saw, can wad sheets, tie them tight up in a ball and lift it with one hand, balancing it over her head. She is something else. Even Mizz Addie seems admirous.

I reckon it is a wonderment that somebody like me's got a room like this. All mine—not a porch cot, not a little closet-size one to share with however many more. Four square white walls, a real bed with a clean cover, sheets, my own pillow. I'm situated at the short end of the outback building—that's what Mizz Addie calls this place I'm lazing a little this afternoon, where I'll sleep tonight and every night from now on, where Bess and Chantal earn they living. Outback.

She chose a name for the main house, too. Hazelhedge, on account of the bushes grow tall round the porch. They'll keep prying eyes out, she says. Got a wooden sign made up

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with the name carved on it, painted red and gold, and stuck on a post in the front yard grass.

You ask me, that name ain't half fancy enough to suit. Ain't anybody asked, though.

This's been the busiest three weeks I ever lived through. And what's happened to this Hazelhedge in the betweentime's about as wondrous as the magical changement came over Bess and Chantal the day I first saw them in their working clothes, when they went all a sudden from homely white girls to fancy hoes. Which Mizz Addie says I ain't supposed to call them, but in my head I tend to.

Mizz Addie's big on proper names for things. "*Ladies*, Minyon." That's what she wants me to call them. "Sporting ladies, if you will." According to her, this ain't no hoe house, either—it's a sporting house.

The last bit of furniture got delivered today. Mizz Addie took me round to every room, teaching me proper names, telling what I'm supposed to do. Keeping it all straight seems like one big job.

Like the light in the front parlor—so big it took three men to hang. "One hundred and twelve crystals, Minyon." She pulled over a chair and stood on it, reached up and unhooked one of them. Light sparkled like splinters in the room.

"Twice a month, Minyon, take these down, one by one. Soak them in vinegar, scrub them thoroughly, dry them to within an inch of their lives, and put them back up." She hung the crystal back.

"One hundred and twelve, Minyon. And they've all got to shine. No point in having a chandelier, otherwise." My head filled with points and sparkles and the bigness of the job. I felt relieved when she turned the light off and the room settled back to daytime dark.

Two marble tables in the parlor need just once-a-day wiping with a damp cloth, she told me. Brass tables and trays and the spitting bowl—spittoon, she names it—got to be polished every week. Silver, too. "No sense in having nice things, Minyon, if you don't take proper care of them." Real big on proper.

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And dust—Lord, never seen so much stuff got to be dusted every day: lamps with green and red shades, hanging from chains, fringes swinging long and low; fancy paintings with gold frames where the paint stands up thick enough to feel with your finger; mirrors about everywhere you look, with carved gold frames got plenty nooks and crannies for dust to hide; big vases Mizz Addie says come from clear round the world, place named China.

That ain't all I got to do, either—not even close. In the cleaning department, they's sweeping every day, and scrubbing two toilets plus this one special one made just for cleaning your cooter. And washing the dishes they dirty up at night. Glasses take forever, how she makes me do—one at a time in the sink, same as chandelier crystals. She's awful big on one at a time, too.

Then's the sheet situation—enough to keep a body hopping all night. Every time Bess or Chantal get through with a customer, I got to run up, rip off sheets, and put on a fresh set before the next show starts. Seem like the biggest waste in the world to me—sometimes ain't a wet spot nor a stray hair on them.

After seven or eight times a night, I'm wore out with it and ain't even half through. The linens make a huge pile in the kitchen, so every morning when Ophelia comes and takes a look, she shakes her head, rolls eyes to heaven, says something like, "Lord, those girls been *too* busy last night." Then she commences wrapping the sheets up to take home. Every day she brings a clean load, takes home a dirty one. Mizz Addie says clean linens's the surest sign of a first-class sporting house. Which this one surely must be.

Ophelia don't stay but about an hour, getting that laundry together, and sometimes she's come and gone before I get to see her. Which I'm sorry for, on account of they's something about her comforts me, with her big old wide self. Makes me miss my old Gan in Little Town, want nothing so bad as to just crawl up in Ophelia's large lap, quit cleaning and changing sheets and polishing and learning the proper name for everything in sight.

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Two other coloreds work here now, but don't none but me live in. Sarah the cook, she comes round four of an afternoon, cooks the one real meal we eat, which I'm generally starving plumb to death for by then. I eat on the side porch cot used to be my bed, a heaping plate of good food every afternoon except Sunday, when we pretty much got to scrounge for ourselves.

Sarah's the blackest woman I ever saw, with hair pulled back in a bun so tight it makes her eyes slant up. Face's never once cracked a smile since she's been here—maybe since she's been born, for all I know. She's so dark and fed-up looking, I do my best to stay right out that kitchen when she's in it. I ain't know what that woman's so mad over, but I ain't particular about getting in the way of it.

Then they's Frank Washington. He comes in time for supper most days, and two times now he's sat with me on the side porch. We don't talk much, just sit together for eating. He fixes drinks for the customers, nights, and generally makes himself useful. "You have to have one good man in a proper sporting house, Minyon." That's what Mizz Addie says. "Keeps everybody honest."

I reckon Frank is one good man—ain't been round him enough to say for sure. He's one big man, anyhow, most has to stoop to come in the door. Got nappy hair close to his head, turning white some places, so must be's got some age to him. Strong as a mule, too, picked up one heavy old chair Mizz Addie calls damask and moved it clear cross the room one afternoon, like it's nothing. Cleaning in there the next day, I pushed against that thing with all my might, couldn't even budge it. I basically plan to stay on the good side of Mr. Frank, too.

Mizz Addie don't limit her teaching habits to me. She's all the time teaching Frank about the liquors he's in charge of—they got proper names, too, naturally. She tells them to Frank, makes him repeat them back to her. French names, she says. Best wine comes from there, else Germany. Bourbon from Kentucky. Don't make no nevermind about gin, she says.

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Wednesday's bootlegger day. She and Frank meet him at his truck, checking what he got, arguing about the price of this and that. First time he came, in the midst of price-haggling, Bess came yawning out her room, round three in the afternoon, half-dressed, looking for coffee and a smoke. Bootlegger's jaw dropped open when he caught sight of one large bosom about to come loose its wrapper.

Mizz Addie ain't slow. She caught him looking, said something low; he nodded, then she waltzed over to Bess; and in no time flat, hoe and bootlegger'd disappeared into Bess's room. Ain't as much trouble about pricing since, and Bess's got Wednesday afternoons booked regular.

Not that regular bookings's a problem, anyhow. The problem's more that they's too much business for just two hoes to handle, I believe. Hard as I working, I surely ain't hankering to trade places with them.

Those girls' days start much later than mine—generally by two or three they up, Chantal whining for coffee, Bess looking like what Mizz Addie calls the wreck of the Hesperus. She tries to make them stay close if anybody's around, on account of she don't want possible customers making judgments based on they daytime-looking selves.

Starting somewhile after supper—which is breakfast for them—around four-thirty or so, they get into their fixing-up routine. Sometimes, when I'm on break a minute, they let me watch. Chantal paints her pointy little nails blood red every day. Bess's nails're bit down to the quick, but she's got some long purple ones she glues on right before she goes into the parlor. I sometimes find one of them nails in a bed when I change sheets. Gives me a real start, every time—like Bess's losing parts of her own self in there.

Chantal, she likes bickering—all the time picking fights with Bess. They screech a minute, sometimes Chantal throws a little something, and then before you know it, they make up, and Bess's piling Chantal's hair high, making little curls round her neck, arranging her long feather scarf just so. Sometimes Chantal makes Bess's face up for her, saying Bess don't

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know how to do it right. They try on this and that, telling each other what looks good and what don't. Then fight some more, then make up.

Mizz Addie don't allow liquor in off-time, says drink leads sporting ladies down the wrong path, but they generally manage to lay hands on some anyhow—specially with Bess spending her Wednesday afternoons how she does. So they take a little nip along and along, while they fixing up.

Then round eight, they troop on over to the main house parlor, drape themselves cross the furniture, play records on the victrola. Chantal, she likes the blues. Bess likes just about everything. And round about nine or ten, work starts.

How they stand it, jumping in bed with any old man's got the money and inclination, I ain't know. In between changing linens, I now and again catch sight of customers. They every kind of man you can think of—saw one so fat he had slits for eyes, fingers like wild hog sausages, following close behind tiny Chantal, who's leading him off to her outback room. Some smoke big fat cigars Mizz Addie keeps in carved wood boxes, and they drink till you can smell the trail of them, stale and smoky, follow it with your eyes closed up tight. They're loud and sometimes mean. I hear Chantal and Bess talk about that, how sometime they treat them so rough. It gets bad enough, they's Frank around. So far nothing's got that bad, though.

All night long, those girls traipse back and forth between parlor and rooms, with me right behind, tearing off sheets, making up beds. One night I made up twelve beds for Bess. Next day she groaned and moaned; Mizz Addie said twelve's about the limit for a high-class sporting lady, on account of health reasons. Though how she knows I ain't sure—she never does the serious work her own self—just glides round the parlor, making sure every man's got a full glass, and the music's right, and they blood's getting up.

Mornings, round three or four, the place clears out and I get to go to bed. Sometimes they's another customer or two still making time, but I ain't responsible for the last change

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of sheets. Those girls tend to sleep in the last set, anyhow—too tired to care, I reckon.

So my job might be about to run me ragged, but I am greatly glad not to have theirs.

Mizz Addie says we all got to do double duty right now, on account of just starting up like this. "Hazelhedge will be the finest sporting house on the east coast, Minyon. People will come from far and wide, just to see what we're all about." She tells how houses like this're what she calls a vanishing breed, since New Orleans got shut down, since what she calls the big boys done moved into Chicago, which is way up north. "We will make history here, Minyon."

Ain't know about history, but I made me six dollars here. Keep it in my dresser drawer, right by the bed. Open up that drawer, pull out them six bills, smell them, rub them, think what all they can buy.

Then I think of my sweet old Gan, who sent me off here, who knows why. I see her head so still and drooped behind the closed-up screen door. Our ramshackle shanty, fatback and rice. Think how fine I eat now; got my own clean room, this money. About how my baby bub Clarence needs somebody to keep him from thumbsucking, how I miss my cuz Farina, our loblolly days, our whispery nights. My eyes fill then, can't keep from, and I hold Gan's blanket close like it's some bit of her here with me.

A car door slams outside. I open my door one tiny crack, see a huge, shiny black car, with a silver medal on front. And who I see standing beside it makes my breath draw in sharp.

He's in a dark suit, hat pulled low and to one side some. Ain't seen him but three times, but that's enough. I know him. It's Mr. Waldo Carnelian himself, the one owns Arcadia Plantation, and Little Town, where my folks been left behind. He's standing right in this Hazelhedge yard, like my thinking about home's done conjured him from thin air.

I feel a hard stab at my heart, want to run right out, call to him: How's my Gan? Clarence still sucking that thumb? Farina's cat have babies yet? Big brother Jesse got himself in

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trouble with the boss again? Course, even if I did, he wouldn't know the first answer—he don't much truck with us. Seeing him here, though, I all of a sudden feel more like I been gone from home three years, instead of three weeks, and I miss my people something fierce.

Mr. Waldo, he just stands there looking at Hazelhedge, hands in pockets. In a minute, he walks over to the sign, runs one finger over the raised-up wood part. He turns to head over my way now, seems like's looking straight at where my eye shines out from this door crack. My palms go sweaty and I'm fixing to slam the door shut and lie down in my bed like I been napping all along, when I see Mizz Addie come round from the front of the house. She tippytoes up behind him while he walks on, must don't hear her. She steps right up and puts her hands cross his eyes, knocks his hat right to the ground, and I think to myself, uh oh, gone be the devil to pay now—when Mr. Waldo turns quick, picks her right up off her feet and swings round with her. They both commence laughing to beat the band, her arms round his neck and Mr. Waldo looking like a sixteen-year-old schoolboy instead of something closer to fifty, and one of the richest men in the world, according to what Gan told.

He puts her down, and they stand out there in the yard and kiss like's not a bit of shame in it. Watching, I picture Mizz Gertrude—that's Mr. Waldo's wife—with that thick-as-a-treetrunk waist and what Gan calls her overabundance of chins. Still, she's been pretty nice to us—passing along her old clothes and sometimes sending down this or that leftover party food. All I can think of right now, though, is that Mr. Waldo'd have his work cut out for him, trying to lift that woman and twirl her, how he's just this minute doing Mizz Addie.

By now the two of them's walking round the place. Her arm's through his, and they strolling like Sunday promenade time. She points, he talks, she talks back, gazing up at him. Every now and again, he just looks down at her face, and even from this far, ain't no mistaking that he's crazy-fool in love.

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Mizz Addie's hair's all wild and gold round her face, and she's dressed in some wispy something where you think you see skin here and there underneath, but ain't sure if it's that or just a trick of the light. She glows like sunrise, and he's helpless as a whipped pup before it. Near makes me sorry for him.

Coming close to outback now, maybe close enough to spot one shiny eyeball, so I close my door quieter than quiet and slip over to my bed. Hear them now, passing by. Rumble of his voice, then her low music.

"She's fine, Waldo, really. A good little worker. You were right."

Pondering what that means a minute, losing track of they talk, when I hear his voice clear as if he's in the room with me: "Old Gan Tucker's going downhill fast," he says.

They sufficient close now to hear the crunch of feet on dirt, the rustle of clothes. I stay so still I hear my own eye blink.

"She knew it, too—tough old bird—when she came to ask me about finding a place for Minnie." Feet pass right by, walking on. I hear her ask something, don't make out what, but when he answers back, seem like I hear Jesse's name spoke, though I ain't sure.

As I lie here looking up at the ceiling, it all fits together—how it is I come to be here, and Mizz Addie, too. Mr. Waldo's part of the answer for us both: Mizz Addie's here on account of him being so fool in love with her and rich enough to do something about it; I'm here on account of him, too—him and my Gan together.

One at a time, everything that's happened slips into place in my head—*click, click, click*—till it's straight as a cornrow. The last part falls with a bang: my Gan's bad sick, for sure.

Which knowing makes me sit straight up in my bed, reach over to my dresser drawer, pull out six crisp dollar bills and stuff them in my shoe. Going to the door, I see Mr. Waldo and Mizz Addie disappear round front. Got a pretty good guess where they headed. All's quiet from Bess and Chantal's rooms—they busy fixing up. Frank's not here yet, Sarah's cleaning up after supper. And me, I'm out of here, slipping

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quick and sly from my door to the woods, smelling my own sweat and the pine straw, six bills in my shoe, a whiff of Mizz Addie's French perfume, and something like freedom.

Got one thought in my head: Gan's going downhill fast, and I got to run like the wind to get there before she reaches bottom.

And just when I take my one last look back at that house holds them folks I'm leaving behind, I hear Ophelia's voice, sounding like she's telling me truth straight in my ear: *This ain't no place for the likes of you*. I nod to that smart woman, wherever she's biding, and head on to find the place that is.

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Elizabeth Bishop— May Swenson Correspondence

For years I have enjoyed teaching May Swenson's subtle poem "Dear Elizabeth," an intricate meditation on sexuality and exoticism, though I have found my classes startled when I claimed it constituted a kind of causerie between the two lesbian poets about their situation as lesbians, as poets. Through the good offices of Judith Hemschemeyer and Zan Knudson, I have culled an illustrative bouquet (it is what anthology *means in Greek) from the letters between Bishop and Swenson (part of their extended correspondence now in the Olin Library at Washington University, Saint Louis) which concern "Dear Elizabeth" and other literary matters of interest to both poets at the time (1963–1965).*

A reference in Swenson's letter of November 6, 1965 compels comment; she regrets Bishop's omission of the poem "Exchanging Hats" from Questions of Travel *(Swenson herself had performed the poem at a reading in New York in 1962, reporting to its author that the audience responded with "respectful hilarity"). Indeed "Exchanging Hats" is one of only four poems that Bishop published (in* New World Writing, *1956) and decided not to collect. One biographer suggests that the poem seemed "to appropriate distorted versions of real people in a way Elizabeth always hated," but most critics note that the poem is much franker about the powers of transvestite perspective—and its implicit criticism of gender stereotypes—than Bishop was willing to acknowledge. Swenson's question ("Why didn't you include it?") is perhaps answered in the course of her own poem, presented here, with its interesting citations from Bishop herself that constitute a sort of descant on the likelihood of "song without husbands."*

—Richard Howard

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Dear Elizabeth†

Yes, I'd like a pair of *Bicos de Lacre*—
meaning beaks of "lacquer" or "sealing wax"?
(the words are the same in Portuguese)
". . . about 3 inches long including the tail,
red bills and narrow bright red masks . . ."
You say the male has a sort of "drooping
mandarin-mustache—one black stripe"—

otherwise the sexes are alike. "Tiny but
plump, shading from brown and gray on top
to pale beige, white, and a rose red spot
on the belly"—their feathers, you tell
me, incredibly beautiful "alternating
lights and darks like nearly invisible
wave-marks on a sandflat at low tide,

and with a pattern so fine one must put on
reading glasses to appreciate it properly."
Well, do they sing? If so, I expect their
note is extreme. Not something one hears,
but must watch the cat's ears to detect.
And their nest, that's "smaller than a fist,
with a doorway in the side just wide enough

for each to get into to sleep." They must
be very delicate, not easy to keep. Still,
on the back porch on Perry St., here, I'd
build them a little Brazil. I'd save every
shred and splinter of New York sunshine
and work through the winter to weave them
a bed. A double, exactly their size,

† A reply to Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil.

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with a roof like the Ark. I'd make sure to
leave an entrance in the side. I'd set it
in among the morning-glories where the
gold-headed flies, small as needles' eyes,
are plentiful. Although "their egg is apt
to be barely as big as a baked bean . . ."
It rarely hatches in captivity, you mean—

but we could hope! In today's letter you
write, "The *Bicos de Lacre* are adorable as
ever—so tiny, neat, and taking baths
constantly in this heat, in about ¼ inch
of water—then returning to their *filthy*
little nest to lay another egg—which
never hatches." But here it might! And it

doesn't matter that "their voice is weak,
they have no song." I can see them as I
write—on their perch on my porch. "From
the front they look like a pair of half-
ripe strawberries"—except for that stripe.
"At night the cage looks empty" just as
you say. I have "a moment's fright"—

then see the straw nest moving softly.
Yes, dear Elizabeth, if you would be so
kind, I'd like a pair of *Bicos de Lacre*—
especially as in your P.S. you confess,
"I already have two unwed female wild
canaries, for which I must find husbands
in order to have a little song around here."

—*May Swenson*

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Bishop to Swenson, Rio, August 27, 1963

Dear May,

I gave Betty Theorides the samba record for you, and put a note in it . . . you'll be hearing from her on the telephone around the 20th of September, I think—whenever the S.S. Brazil gets into New York . . . The trouble is that now I can't remember what I've written you and what I haven't! I think I did write you about Lota's having been in the hospital, etc.—and the note with the record wasn't news, just information about the samba . . .

Oh—I have three new birds—Betty T. had about 20 and gave them all away except one lonely little yellow and green creature she handed to me at the last minute. It turns out to be a female wild canary and I think I'll have to get it a husband. Then I couldn't resist a pair of Bica Lacquas (lacquer beaks, or maybe sealing-wax beaks—the word's the same)—I wish I could send you a pair and I wonder if they import them. They're the most adorable bird I know—about 3" long, including the tail—extremely delicate; bright red bills and narrow bright red masks. The male has a sort of mandarin drooping moustache—one black line—otherwise they're just alike. They're tiny but plump—and the feathers are incredibly beautiful, shading from brown and gray on top to pale beige, white, and a rose-red spot on the belly—but all this in almost invisible ripples of color blending with white—wave-ripples, just like sand ripples on a sand flat after the tide has gone out—all so fine I have to put on my reading-glasses to appreciate it properly. They're almost as affectionate as lovebirds, and they have a nest—smaller than a fist—with a doorway in the side, that they both get in to sleep. The egg is about as big as a baked bean—rarely hatches in captivity—but I'm hoping. From the front they look like a pair of half-ripe strawberries. You'd like them! But now I have two unwed female canaries—must find them husbands in order to have a little song around here. We're all silent together for the present.

Much love, Elizabeth

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Swenson to Bishop, New York, September 25, 1963

Dear Elizabeth:

The Samba record came today—just before I left for work. I only had time to play "love isn't like that"—very exciting rhythm, very pure. I'll give you my complete reactions to all of them—Pearl and I both will—when we've had a chance to enjoy them properly. . . . We couldn't have imagined a nicer present—and it's something *nobody* else will have around here. (Like the Brazilian birds record that we still startle people with—but the samba is danceable—and how!) . . .

Elizabeth, I've written a poem about those *Bica Lacquas* that you described in a recent letter—I've used *your words* almost exactly, because the way you expressed their appearance and habits, etc. is so charming—and, by chance, without your knowing it, you made some rhymes. I've put quotes around most of what you wrote—which is a good portion of the poem. It's written like a letter—but of course I don't actually *mean* for you to send me the *Bica Lacquas* (as I ask you to do in the poem). Soon as I make it presentable I'll send it to you. Have the wild canaries got husbands yet? . . .

September 26

I worked on the poem some more, so I'm sending it. Although it's probably not done. Too wordy, and too cute, maybe. What do you think? The only good parts are yours . . . Thanks again for the record . . . I'll write you about it in detail next letter.

Love to you, and to Lota. From Pearl, too.

Bishop to Swenson, Samambaia, October 3, 1963

Dear May:

. . . I am glad you got the record safely—how did Betty get it to you—and I shall expect you to be samba-ing next time I see you. That record *sounds* like Carnival—there are

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many more beautiful old sambas and *marchinhas*—but it's hard to get good recordings—they insist on jazzing them up, or making them pretty—and the words are the best part anyway . . .

Now our bird poem: Oh dear I had the name partly wrong, I see—It's *Bico Lacre*—I had the *lacre* wrong because I went by the way the man in the shop and our maid say it—and the "lower orders" often leave out "r"s—sort of baby-talk. Also, I'm afraid they come from Africa . . . You can probably see them among the finches in the Radio City subway pet shop. Joanna swore they had them up in her northern state and described them most poetically, but a boy I know, a zoologist, was here yesterday and said they're either Australian or African. So you can go see them and check on my accuracy. There's no real "spot"—just a faintly deeper rose color on the belly. The egg is—well, I think I said "jelly bean" but maybe it's smaller: a *Boston* baked bean would be right—not a N.Y. one. *I* must put on my reading-glasses—not *tudo o mundo*. I'm just getting more & more far-sighted with age. There's no "stripe," just the male's black pencil-line moustache. I think you should have a pair, too. Here I paid what—with inflation—came to 22 cents each for them . . . The brute of a woman in the pet shop said "if you cut their claws they'll get tame"! if you cut their claws they'll die of heart attacks, more like it.

The name might be different in English—but you should recognize them after writing a poem about them. I think the poem might work out rather well . . . Someone told me he'd seen a poem dedicated to me in the last Donald Hall paperback anthology—I have no idea whose it is—but thought it might be yours about the owl. The someone is actually a nice young American couple—he's here from Rutgers on a Fulbright, teaching Am. Lit.—the first really nice U.S. academics I've met here and I wish I could see more of them—but with 3 children and no telephone it is hard. But it is fun to discuss Mark Twain again, or *Moby-Dick* . . . except I am so much harder on novelists than the young seem to be—I rarely like

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them . . . Now I've just read *The Group*—felt I had to. Mary was a year ahead of me so I was not in her "group" (thank heavens) although we were friends. My oldest friend, with whom I went to school, camp, *and* college, is "Helena"—if you read it. Mary lets her off lightly! but doesn't bring her to life. I recognize "Helena" and her mother and Mary's 1st husband, and pieces of Mary herself, and Eunice Jessup, and bits of the others—but its too much like trying to remember a dream for me to judge it at all—I imagine it's very uneven—almost as if she really hadn't finished it—I admire her *gall.* I dislike the age we live in that makes that kind of writing seem necessary, though. We're all brutes . . .

Bishop to Swenson, Rio, October 12, 1963

Dear May:

. . . More about the Bicos de Lacre. I was both right & wrong. I'll quote from a big, colored photograph, children's Bird Book. The Bico de Lacre is speaking: "My great grandparents were born in Africa. They came to Brazil long ago. They adapted themselves so well to the new land that they seem like natives. Frankly, I consider myself as Brazilian as you are . . . My voice is very nice, but weak, and I have no song. Even so, people like me, and find me pretty and *simpatico* . . . I do not mind being caged [?] as long as I am well-treated and have plenty of seed. I can live with other small birds and make friends with them. I get along beautifully with my wife. Occasionally we fight, but it's nothing, and we soon make up. My nest is small and round and I help to hatch the eggs. I am very small (8 centimeters or a bit more [= 3 inches]) and look so much like my wife that people often confuse us. In Brazil I live wild, especially in the states of Guanabara, Rio de Janeiro, and Sao Paolo. I prefer to live in groups with other Bicos de Lacre, and also with other birds. My favorite food is "wild seed" [Has another name, of course] . . ."

A young botanist & natural historian who's working with Lota has lent me some books, including the one I've quoted

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from. One is called "The Bird-Lover," and besides all the birds, it gives complete and rather awful instructions how to catch them, build traps and cages, etc. The cages—of bamboo—are very pretty, though. It's really a passion with many people here; I know some dull men who know all about birds and keep 40 or 50 in their apartments—take them for airings the way the Chinese do, etc. I don't really approve—but at least they *see* them, and that's something. I'm about to buy another pair of Bicos de Lacre tomorrow—seeing they're so sociable. You should see this pair bathing, in about ¼ an inch of water . . .

Lots of love, Elizabeth.

Apparently all the Bicos de Lacre here are descended from some that escaped.

Swenson to Bishop, New York, October 31, 1963

Dear Elizabeth:

Please forgive me for taking so long to answer—I have been quite swamped. The last thing I got from you was a card from Samambaia, and a day or two before, your letter from there . . . The samba record came by mail—I expect your Betty T. sent it from the States—we're so very glad to have it. We have some friends who are great goat-skin drummers and had them to a party recently—they augmented the record so effectively that Prof. Plant downstairs hammered on the ceiling for quiet—and of course we were dancing, too. (I love those wild whistles that indicate a change of rhythm.) . . .

About the *Bico Lacres*—does *lacre* mean lacquer or sealing wax? If not, what? You did say "rose-red *spot*" and "baked bean" not "jelly bean"—and I don't care, I want to use your original words. Don't care if they're originally from Africa or Australia—I want to place them in Brazil. But I *will* go up to the Bronx Zoo (where they have a splendid bird pavilion with everything in the world in it) and meet the little wonders

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personally. I was up there with Margaret Marshall and Alice Morris about six weeks ago. Zambesie and Ranee, the lioness and tigress that I once wrote a poem about, are *gone*. I saw in another cage an old lioness that *looked* like Zambesie—but all alone . . . I must find that Donald Hall anthol. with a poem dedicated to you . . . I'll send it to you when I get it so you can see who else is "using" you (besides me and Howard [Moss —*Ed.*]—I'd never be able to do as well as *he* did in his poem to you.) Darn it, I'm sorry to hear you're not one of Mary's *Group*—I don't want to read it much, now—but will, since I've got it on reserve at the library . . . The visit to Smith College two weeks ago turned out o.k. I got through a question period with students and profs. fairly well. I got around it by saying a poet doesn't have to *know* anything—only teachers and students have to know. Somebody said, "What—not have to know *anything*?" I said, "Well, one should know the alphabet—and a little grammar doesn't hurt, as long as you don't get too stuck on it" . . .

Love to you, and love to Lota . . .

Bishop to Swenson, Rio, November 11, 1963

Dear May:

. . . Maybe a letter got lost—or you couldn't read it. Bicos de Lacre—"lacquer beaks" or "sealing-wax beaks"—same word. They use their little nest all the time now—it's woven straw (bought ready-made)—and they sleep in it, unlike most birds—and often sit in it, very cozy, side by side, just the tiny scarlet beaks and bright eyes peering out. I am so crazy about them I am about to get a much bigger cage and two or three more "couples." At night the cage looks empty and I have a moment's fright—then see the little straw nest moving softly. (It's about as big as your fist, with an opening about one and a half inches wide, on the side.) Now I think I have really exhausted that subject . . .

Well, the D. Hall just turned out to be Cal's [Robert Low-

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ell —*Ed.*] "Skunk Hour" all over again—rather pathetic of me! Oh heavens no—read the book and you'll see I'm thankful not to be in *The Group*! My poor friends . . . Thank you for everything—and write again when you can—lots of love,

Elizabeth

Bishop to Swenson, Rio, November 13, 1963

Dear May:

. . . Friday is the Brazilian 4th of July—Independence Day—that means a nice long weekend, thank goodness. The city is warming up for summer. The Bicos de Lacre are bathing furiously. I'm afraid they'll drown.

Love, E.

Bishop to Swenson, Rio, March 9, 1964

Dear May:

I'm beginning to feel like that bell in the desert that rings & rings and no one hears it—so it really DOESN'T make any sound. I did send you a card and a letter, I think, but apparently you didn't get any of the messages. I suppose there will come a point, if the Brazilian Post Office goes on the way it's going, at which I'll give up. At present I feel I should keep on trying—but what good that's going to do I can't imagine. . . . *Should* one expect letters to arrive? Is it awfully bourgeois? Won't even the proletariat, come utopia, want to get their letters? Or does that need cease? . . . Now that I think of it—that's one thing I have never read about Russia—have you?—the Post Office Dept. Do they get letters? Do they bother to write them? Most Brazilians I know gave up a hundred years ago and seem to feel now that any letter-writing—that isn't reading-&-writing class feel—is a sure sign of neurosis . . .

The Bicos de Lacre are as adorable as ever—so tiny—so clean,

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taking baths constantly in this heat, and then retiring to their *filthy* little nest to lay another egg—which never hatches . . .

I like that poem about the plane very much—but—I hope you won't think I'm being impolite or perhaps even dumb—perhaps you *wanted* to say that?—I can't BEAR the word "like" used instead of "as if." But perhaps you have decided in favor of that use of it? In which case there's nothing much I can say, because it is a possibility—but PLEASE look at Fowler, page 325—I just hate it.

March 11

I think I stopped then because I lost my nerve! And now look what the ROYAL machine has done to the letter, chewed it up. Lota's secretary is here this morning and using the small machine—and neither of them works right anyway—this bloody climate: everything rusts or mildews in no time at all.

Betty T. came yesterday with two cages of birds—3 more Bicos de Lacre and a small wild one, rather sad, gray-blue, big black eyes. Betty's janitor catches birds all the time on the rooftop and gives them to her. This one she wanted to let go. Unfortunately as she put it in a cage or something she pulled its tail out . . . Now we think it shouldn't be let go until it has grown a new tail, otherwise it can't maneuver properly. It has about half an inch now . . . I think on my next trip up to Petropolis, I'll take it along and let it go somewhere on the mountainside—far away from my dear cats. The other Bicos de Lacre are two females and a male. Each female has a nest and the male sits in the middle and chirps to them—apparently he divides his favors evenly because they all seem very happy. But now I'll acquire another male and then I'll have three couples and put them all in one big cage. I think they prefer that—they have a very charming way of all sitting close together in a row, leaning on each other . . .

Lots of love, and to Pearl,

Elizabeth

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Swenson to Bishop, New York, June 30, 1965

Dear Elizabeth

. . . Do you remember that quite long ago when you were telling me about the *Bicos de Lacre* in your letters I began work on a poem in which I used word-for-word quotations from your letters? I sent you a rough copy once when it was still a mess. Well, I finally finished it and sent it with a batch of other poems to *The New Yorker*, and Howard now wants to print it—he took several others as well. Since it really amounts to an inadvertent collaboration on your part, and *your* descriptions of the birds is what made me want to write it—they're what give it any distinction it may have, I think—it's necessary to have your approval to print it, I should think. Besides, Howard says that technically they ought to have permission to use your quotes. He's going to put it into proof—since I said I was rather sure you wouldn't object—but if you let me know it's not o.k. I'll withdraw it of course. Howard also wants me to add, under the title in parenthesis, "A Reply to Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil"—which I will do, if that's all right with you. If there's anything not factually correct—or anything at all you object to—maybe you would mark it on one of the enclosed copies and send it back? I say this with trepidation—but never mind, I mean it . . . Love to you and Lota, May (and Pearl)

Bishop to Swenson, Rio, July 5, 1965

Dear May:

I'm leaving in the morning for a week in Bahia (Salvador) and it is already midnight, but I think I must write you a note at least to thank you for the poem. It really came fast—I got my mail sent down by bus from Petropolis today—I think it must have reached P. in three days. I like the poem very much and so does Lota—she said "I've always said that May is my favorite poet next to you . . ." There aren't any mistakes. I have only one suggestion—and it's not a mistake,

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or if it is it is mine. The end of stanza three the nest "smaller than a fist—(about the same size really, if that will help! depends on whose fist)/with a doorway in the side just wide enough/for *each* [instead of *both*] to get into to sleep." I put it badly I'm afraid—sounds a bit as if they squeezed through side by side, when of course 1st one then the other used the doorway—which was about this big [drawing —*Ed.*]—and they popped in and out all day and sometimes sat with one head just showing, or two beaks. It's the word "both" that bothers, and I feel I should be the one to solve this since apparently it is a quotation from me. /"for them to get through, to sleep" or you could leave out "in the side," since that's unnecessary and say "with a doorway just wide enough for them/to get into the nest to sleep." But look, May, any way you see best to put it will be quite all right, or leave it as it is if you prefer—it is *my* loss in this case if the picture isn't clear . . . One buys the nest ready-made, of fine straw, almost a ball—the opening is really *very* small—well, I think you have made a very charming poem out of it and it was an awfully nice thing to do—I am glad to hear there are others too—I have on my list here to write you about the last I saw—flying back from Utah—which I liked very much . . . What Howard suggests under the title is all right with me, too—I should think just "Letter" or even "A Reply to E.B. in Brazil" might sound better at the beginning—what do you think—since *reply* suggests one of those literary controversy things rather than simple letters—and since you seem to refer to 2 of mine—you might use a plural for your poem, too—or singular, as you prefer—or whatever Howard thinks. They are fiends for accuracy of course—but so am I, in my way—so are you in your carefulness in this—so are we all. And so goodnight . . .

Love to you & Pearl, Elizabeth.

[*Swenson's script on the bottom of this letter*: "No, I think I'll "reply" too—2nd thought—because it starts with that Yes!—reply *is* better."—*Ed.*]

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Swenson to Bishop, New York, November 6, 1965

Dear Elizabeth

. . . Your new book is beautiful in every way. It arrived yesterday, a big surprise! I had to stop what I was doing and read it all immediately—all but the story. What's nice about the total effect is that all the poems really do bear out the title, though not as if planned. And then every poem is an excellence—19 bull's-eyes one after the other. There's one left out I wish were here: "Exchanging Hats." Why didn't you include it in *Elsewhere*? I found one little typo: p. 16—I think it should be "a child's fistful *of* bluets"—Aren't you pleased with the whole production job? Really lovely paper and typeface—and the jacket's fine—the drawing of you is accurate—more so than any photo I've seen—he's drawn your hands most tellingly, and your eyes, and characteristic attitude—only the mouth isn't quite yours—the lower lip, specifically—too gross . . . I'm terribly proud to have your new book—with kisses—in about a year I hope to give you a copy of mine, which I may call *Half Sun Half Sleep*. Scribners says they can put it out by then, and I'm trying to select from my miscellany of about 90 poems written since 1963—maybe a third are worth it. I'm sending Howard a batch today or tomorrow of so far unsubmitted ones. There's a rumor he's going to leave the *New Yorker*—have you heard that? I must corner him and ask him. It would be a great blow . . . The other thing I'd like to know for sure is—are you coming here next year, or sooner? Please come—I've been reading Jarrell's *The Lost World*. Some wonderful poems there. The one about the X-ray room is chilling. I never met him—now it's too late . . .

By this time you will have seen the "Dear Elizabeth" in print. I made only one major change from the typed copy you approved—"*each* to get into to sleep"—instead of "*both*"—your pointing out the confusion about "both" was much appreciated. I hadn't noticed it. I'm still a bit worried that with "*each*" one doesn't visualize them sleeping *together* in the nest. I hope it's all right. Many people have commented

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on the poem—liked it—well, as I always say, *you* wrote it, mostly . . .

What a brilliant idea to reprint *arrival at Santos* as your beginning poem—and to include *In the Village*—which *is* a poem in prose. I love everything in your book. It's flawless. *Of course you are absolutely unique as a poet. You write the hard truth—yet there is so much pleasure in each poem—as in reality itself, when we face it with concentration—let it flood us.* Love to you, and Lota. Pearl is fine and sends love. Shall we see you soon?

MS

Bishop to Swenson, Rio, November 10, 1965

Dear May:

This *is*—has to be—just a note, but I do want to tell you right away how much I like the poem or letter to me in the *New Yorker* that just arrived—a month after you got it, probably, so I hope you realize how long magazines take and don't think I was indifferent, ungrateful, or un-pleased all this time . . . If you ever do it again—write me a letter that way (but that is too much to expect in this world, I know) tell Howard to mail me a copy *air mail!* I think it comes off as a poem quite well, don't you? But I hesitate to praise you very much for it, since I do seem to have written quite a bit of it myself. However your parts are better written than mine, I feel (and you did all the work!)—I am seriously going to try to improve my letter-writing style . . . Anyway, I couldn't be more pleased, and I think it is a pretty good collaboration and sometime we should try an even more difficult one, perhaps. Also—Howard must have liked it, since he just wrote *me* that I couldn't use a dedication line in a recent poem of mine—and yet he let you get away with a very obvious dedication . . . Thank you very much, May . . .

I imagine you've received a copy of my book by now, and hope you like it. I think as a book it is quite pretty—a bit too stylish, maybe—but as far as contents go it should certainly

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be twice as thick. You already know all the poems in it, so please don't think you have to write me a detailed letter about them—that would be too boring, to go over them all again when you've already written me lots of agreeable things about them . . . I promise you I'll write a real letter soon and I wish you'd write to me when you can—to the Rio address? What are you doing? I see your name everywhere. How is Pearl—give her my love, with lots for you and many thanks,

Elizabeth.

8 P.M. Mary sent down a batch of mail today and Lota brought it home from work with her—and so I have opened up this letter to say I have just read yours of November 5th (how fast) and thank you very much once more. It says COPY at the top—I wonder if that means you mailed an earlier one. The mails have really been too exasperating lately—and I have lost lots of things, I think . . . Anyway I got the *New Yorker* and your letter both in the same afternoon, and that is very nice . . .

Well, I don't think the drawing is too good, but I thought I'd rather have that than a large staring photograph or some large staring blurbs. . . . Oh dear—you found another misprint—please correct on page 40—at the lighthouse *out at sea*." I had no one to read proof but myself, and I *knew* there'd be mistakes. I'll really write again sometime—a more interesting letter I hope—but thank you darling May for your poem and your letter—love,

E.

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The Instinct for Bliss

Melissa Pritchard

Frances Waythorn, her face ghastly as a mime's from a souring paste of yogurt, scrubs walls and wainscotting, praying for bleach, polish, order, something, to check her daughter's latest slide from innocence. Pockets the Bic lighter, so Athena can't smoke. Weasles under the bed, dredging out a feculent nest of candy wrappers, cigarette butts, lewd notes, blood-soiled underwear, so Athena won't get fat or have sex or die. Frances's motions are selfless and efficient, her behavior a worship extending into grief. She refuses to acknowledge the poster of Jim Morrison. If she follows her own heart, stripping his deviant's baby face off the wall over her daughter's bed, who knows what might happen. Mothers like Frances are no longer immune from the retaliation of their daughters. Her face beginning to itch under the dried yogurt, Frances swivels a plush bunny into the center of the eyelet-edged pillow. Her child's room is pulled back, once again, into an immaculate relief of white, except for the poster, unexpungeable as a stain.

Athena, legally halved, is batted lightly between her parents. On alternate weeks she is not at her father's, she resides with Frances, her white room declining into a dank, fetid

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emporium of sloth. Those Sunday afternoons when Athena arrives, a canny refugee, on her mother's doorstep, a soiled, lumpy pillowcase of belongings over one shoulder, declaring she is an atheist who has drunk the blood of stray cats, Frances's labor, much like that of Sisyphus, begins anew, no hope for reprieve, only the diligent untanglement of familiar, defiant knots.

Frances is, in fact, uncrumpling and reading, rereading Athena's smutty notes before packing for her drive to a Navajo wool workshop when the doorbell rings. Hollering, "Wait," then "Sorry," unlocking the door, her face dripping water and patchy, as if with plaster, she sees he has a lovely, surprisingly tender face, this Officer Ruiz, telling her Athena is at the police station with another girl, arrested for shoplifting. He has been busy, attempting to notify the girls' parents. (Guiltily, Frances remembers three distinct times the phone rang as she scavenged under Athena's bed.)

"Where in God's name is her father? She's staying with him this week."

"Ma'am, from what your daughter claims, Mr. Waythorn is in Albuquerque until tomorrow."

He then informs Frances she can come get Athena, or agree to her being held overnight in juvenile detention.

"Of course I'll get her, though I am about to leave for Arizona. What about the other girl?" Frances asks, not really caring, angry that once again, and predictably, Athena's father has left her in the dark, told her nothing of his plans, neglected his daughter, and spoiled her own small hope for independence.

"Her parents have requested she be held overnight."

"In the Taos jail? Good lord. At their age I was in a convent. Reciting Shakespeare. Doing as I was told. Though Athena's father was a delinquent, a truant, he's boasted that often enough."

Frances's tone is bitter, as if she had known him even then, as if she had been harmed, even then, by her husband's errant boyhood.

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So far, Frances decides, this driving across the hammered-flat desert is largely a matter of virulent silence.

Athena catches at a shifting avalanche of cassettes falling from her lap.

"May I play the Red Hot Chili Peppers? Their lyrics are banned." With Frances, almost any 'Mother may I?' worked.

"Banned?" Frances attends carefully, thinks she identifies the phrase *donkey juice* shouted over and over.

"I can't clearly make them out, honey. The words."

Pleased, Athena spritzes her face and arms with water from the plastic spray bottle she's brought, fogging herself like some fragile, costly plant.

"Want some?"

Tepid mist hits Frances, wetting her face. She has a pale rash from the yogurt.

Right now she would rather feed than punish Athena, pad her with double cheeseburgers, damp fries, chocolate shakes. If she's fat, no boy will want to have sex with her. If she's fat, she might not steal. Possibly no one but her mother will want her. She casts a look at Athena, the combat boots, unpolished and heavy looking as bricks, shredded jeans, black tank top, the front of her hair in two taffeta-like maroon flaps, the back of her head a shaved greenish stubble. The starlike design inked onto her upper arm, Frances is afraid to ask if it is a satanic emblem or simply the declaration of an atheist. What if Athena belongs to a cult, a gang? Frances remembers the heavyset woman in a purple tunic on Oprah Winfrey, sobbing, saying you never, ever, know what your children do once they leave the house, you think you do, but you don't. Her son had been machine gunned outside the front door. Actually, it is Frances whose stomach is bloating, whose thighs have widened.

"Ma-maah." Athena says it like a doll. "Where are you heisting me?"

"To a workshop on dyeing wool. I signed up for it at an

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arts fair last month, a freak impulse because I've never woven or dyed a thing in my life. But Athena, at my age, let me tell you, inventing a new life is no zip-i-dee-doo-dah flick of the wrist."

"May I drive?"

"No."

"Pleeze, Ma-mah? Dad lets me drive his truck sometimes."

"Absolutely not. You're supposed to be in jail. And your father's decisions, as you well know, are never mine. Look how he's abandoned you."

"He lets me do what I want, that's different. It is grotesque out here, Ma-maaah."

"Really? I think it has its own beauty. Deserts are spiritual places. Points of transcendence."

This observation rebounds, stilted. And why is Athena talking to her like a rubber doll?

"A couple of things we're to remember when we get there. Can you lower that a bit?"

Athena blunts, reluctantly, her music.

"When you're introduced, you're not to look any of the Navajos directly in the eye."

"Why not?"

"They consider it overly intimate."

"Cool."

Frances glances over. She never knows what will be cool or why.

"A simple enough thing for you."

"What?"

"You never look me in the eye, Athena. Not anymore."

"Not." She pins her mother with a look startlingly lethal.

"Is that genuine? That's frightening."

Athena shrugs. "What was the other thing? You said there were two."

"Fish. You can't eat fish around them. Navajos believe fish are embryonic, unformed humans, something like that. I can't remember. It's in here." Frances pats the guide book on Navajo culture she has brought, largely unread.

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"Fish sticks make me puke anyways."

"Anyway."

"Any-waaaays . . ."

With the toe of her boot, Athena turns up the banned, incoherent lyrics.

•

What finally wakes her, after the others are up, is a sullen drone of flies along the heat-warped window ledge. In a white plastic bucket, blacking the surface of their drinking water, is a cobbled rug of drowned flies. A single fly still walks, if walking, she wonders, is how to describe it, along the battered lip of a tin cup. Frances rolls her sleeping bag next to Athena's, against one of the eight cinderblock walls of the hogan. She hasn't the least idea how to function in a Native American environment, but neatness is never an error. Manners are the same the world over, to quote her mother, and politeness, not sex, the true mortar of civilization. Frances's resolve, now that she is divorced against her will, is to "follow her bliss," a phrase she'd recently heard at a Wild Women of the West seminar, where one of the most astonishing things she had participated in was humping the earth to release pent-up male energy. This is why she has driven all the way out here, to a Navajo reservation. On instinct for bliss. She hasn't the least experience with dyeing wool or weaving anything. She can't even sew. What attracted her was being told this would be a place where, temporarily, no men were allowed.

Scraping open the wood door, Frances sees her red car parked under the mercury yard light, haughtily disassociated from the three trucks, two of which have I ♥ SHEEP stickers on their bumpers while her car has a blue sticker, stuck there by Athena, an upside down cow on it saying MEAT IS DEAD. Athena had left the window on her side down, and with the car so close to the hogan, Frances sees a ratty tailed, saffron rooster patrolling the front seat, back and forth, back and forth, its flat eye proprietary, arrogant.

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"Hey Ma-mah, coffee."

Athena holds out a green, chipped mug, wearing yesterday's clothes, her mouth smeared a pinkish mahogany, a beauty dot pencilled above the bow of her top lip. Over Athena's bare shoulder, if she squinches up her eyes, Frances can make out a half circle of Navajo women bent over an animal of some sort, trussed and quivering on its back.

"Ma-mah, poke on your glasses. You need to see this. They're going to kill a sheep."

Before leaving the hogan, neatly dressed in ironed jeans and a white-fringed, turquoise sweat shirt, Frances, her eyeglasses on, hesitates before a Navajo loom, its cotton warp a pale and tranquil lyre rising up from the muted, traditional design. Cocoons of wrapped yarn hang neatly along the rug's perfect edge, where the weaver stopped. Reluctant to go outside and face any sort of butchery, Frances traces the design's black fretwork with one slowed finger, out to its edge.

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She drinks her coffee, sitting on the ground beside a small cedar fire that burns with tallowy, weak effect in the morning sunlight. The grandmother squats behind the animal's throat, in a wide, pink-fanning skirt, red argyle socks and tennis shoes, her skirt the same medicinal pink as the outhouse, angled downhill as if it might tumble any time, exposing whoever sits, unfortunate, inside. Athena stands near the workshop instructor, a young Navajo woman named Valencia, who brushes a cedar branch, in blessing, over the animal. The grandmother, a white kerchief splashed with red roses concealing most of her face, pulls hard on its head, twists it, breaking the neck, then saws her long knife like a resined bow so blood sprays then spills with a green rushing of spring into a low white bowl, and the animal's bowels loose a sheen of knobbled dung onto the flat, colorless ground.

The fleece is split into a kind of jacket, its creamy lining veined with rich coral. The carcass still cinched within its parch-

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ment membrane, legs splayed four airy directions, suggests to Frances, except for the knob of breast, an upside-down table, fit to work on. The head, facing Frances, is set down in the fire. One eye swells, a black, glazed plum, the other sears and spits shut, then both eyes close, though unevenly, so it cannot look back upon its old form. The tongue doubles, prizing open the charring jaw. The yellow wool blackens, crisps, stinks. Now the spirit of the animal is released from all boundary, is everywhere.

This placid slaughter consoles Frances. A useful dismemberment, ritualized and strangely clean. The carcass squarely hung by hind feet from a cedar pole near the outdoor kitchen, the parchment membrane flensed back, the pursey insides unlocked, emptied out. The wine-brown brooch of liver, for Frances goes to touch it, like warm sea glass. The taupe gray skeins of intestine are pulled and stretched, the Navajo women pour hot water through the lengthened guts from an old tin coffeepot, squeezing and dribbling out the dung-colored stuff. A ripe jeweling of ruby and pewter, pearled matter, a supple kingdom falling over the plain hard canvas of dirt, the dull, droughted, troubled-seeming earth spotted with blood like vital specklings of rain. The stomach with its sallow chenille lining, the drying gloss of lungs, liver, kidneys, draped over a narrow pole. And rising under the callus of blood in the milky flat-faced dish, like a mineral pool, strings of bubbles, a languorous spitting of bubbles, as if something deep under its weight still breathed.

Frances studies these women, the practical details of their butchering, their reverent pulling apart of a life and making it into other, smaller, useful things.

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Two emergency-room nurses from Lubbock are the only other participants in this workshop, and Frances has made no effort to talk to either one of them. A Married Rule, that pretense of sociability. The nurses, both skinny, both earnest

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and, for some reason, wan looking, stick close to the Navajo women, speak in enthusiastic twangings. Frances prays she doesn't resemble them, though she has signed up and paid for this experience, is conscious of being that evil necessity, a tourist with money to purchase a 3-D postcard, "Navajo women at work on the reservation." She wants to tell these Indian women she understands, but what is it she understands, and does she?

"Maa, Maaah. . . ."

Bleating, Athena shuffles outside the tilting outhouse, her nose pinched, her voice nasal.

"You realize there are no males here. None. Except the sheep, and we've just killed him."

"Oh, there are men." Frances's voice is muffled, weary. "Always and eternally there are men." She steps out of the terrible smelling pink box. "My intent, Athena, was to go someplace where, for once, there weren't any. And where the Navajo men who usually live here have gone, I can't imagine. I'm sure it's rude to ask."

They walk back down the slope, Frances whacking at her dusty pants. White pants. What had she been thinking?

"I need some smokes. I have to go into town."

"Town. For heaven's sake, Athena. Look where we are."

"Well, a trading post then. Plus I gotta wash my hair, it's getting completely gross. There's a bathroom in their house, I went in and found it, but no water. You turn the faucets and air spits out. There's not even water in the toilet."

"There's a bad drought. I heard Valencia say it's got something to do with the strip-mining, with the slurry water the mines use. All month they've been hauling water from town."

"These people should move to where there's more trees, more water. God." Athena narrows her eyes over the arid, hopeless, scrabbly landscape, blowing mournful smoke from her last cigarette. "Look. That dumb chicken's still on your front seat."

Athena runs, arms flapping, cigarette dangling, to swat the rooster out of the car. The Navajo women stop what they're

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doing to look, and Frances cannot interpret their faces. She jogs to catch up. She had looked forward to this trip by herself. She had hoped to learn something, or at least stop thinking about what exhausts and obsesses her. Now, looking into Athena's bright, provocative face, Frances sees how precisely, like a scissorcut, it matched her own at that age.

"Athena. You have to behave yourself. When you're the guest of another culture, you blend in, you ask intelligent questions."

"I am. I'm going to ask where the nearest store is and where the men are stashed."

"Athena."

"What."

"Please."

"What."

"You could be in prison right now. I could have left you there until your father decided to come and get you."

"Yada yada yada."

"What were you stealing?"

"Undies."

"Underwear? I just bought you plenty of . . ."

"Sexy underwear, Ma. You've never bought me that."

"May I ask you a simple question? What makes you so sure you are Jim Morrison's wife reincarnated?"

"You're the one who told me about reincarnation."

"Yes, but you can't just make up who you wish you had been. Oh, wouldn't I love to think I was once Thomas Jefferson or Sarah Bernhardt or even Luther Burbank."

"Thomas Jefferson?"

"I've always wanted to be Thomas Jefferson. Do you know who I was in love with at your age?"

"Dad?"

Frances pauses dramatically. "Carl Sandburg."

"Who's that?"

"He's dead now, but he was a famous poet. I wrote Carl Sandburg several passionate letters. He was in his seventies."

"Cool. Mom in love with an old dude."

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"I never mailed them. I knew he had a wife and a goat farm in North Carolina, and probably he was happy."

"What about Dad? Oh, never mind. You'll just say something nasty. You're in that stage now."

"Stage?"

"Of divorce. Denial, rage, stuff like that."

"Where'd you pick up that idea?"

"Dad. He has books on divorce. Just like you."

"The same books?"

"Yup. Exactly. You guys are exactly alike."

Right, Frances thinks. Except he's chosen someone else. He's betrayed me.

•

Doing as she is asked, Athena drags the charred head from the fire by one gristled ear, sets it on a wood block, scrapes off filings of ash with a stick so the head can be wrapped and baked. And when she is certain her mothers sees, for isn't her mother always watching, spying, jealous, easy to fool, a cinch to scare, to give her something really to be scared about, Athena swoops one finger across the bowl of dulling blood and drives it deep into her own mouth. Not long after that, Frances will stand in the parrot-yellow kitchen, stuffing gray, salted mutton into her mouth until the women, laughing, caution her to stop, until they stop laughing and take the plate away, saying this will make her sick. Mutton hunger is what they will say she has.

•

After lunch, they ride in the nurses' truck to the base of a sort of mountain. Everybody gets a plastic grocery sack. They are to follow the grandmother, collect twigs, leaves, roots and mosses, plants Valencia names for them, mullein, lichen, sumac, mountain mahogany, chamisa.

Athena lags behind with the most tired looking nurse, while

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Frances tracks the grandmother, what she can of her, two red argyled ankles flashing up a rigorous incline. Frances slows from the midday heat, the altitude, the enervating whiteness of the sun. In every direction, sealike troughs of land push up clumps of piñon and cedar, like rich, bronze-green kelp. A hawk skates the air above her in fluid, mahogany curls.

Frances nearly trips over the grandmother, crouched by a blunt formation of black rock, on her knees with a table knife, chipping chrome yellow powder from the rock and dusting it off her hands into a plastic bag.

Valencia looks up kindly. "We use this to get our black, mixing it with piñon pitch and cedar ash. It's pretty hard to find, but grandmother is amazing, she goes right to where it is."

The taller nurse stands like a sentinel, a lank poplar, behind Frances.

"That stuff looks like uranium. Exactly."

Frances takes her turn scraping, grazing her knuckles, the uranium idea has unnerved her.

"You could hike up here once a year, get a gigantic load of this stuff to last you."

Frances thinks no one has heard, though the nurse's voice is tactless enough. The grandmother is resting in the compressed, thick shade of a piñon tree, while Valencia, wiping sweat from her forehead, answers, a perceptible teacher's edge to her voice.

"We take only what is needed each time. And Grandmother has taught us to leave an offering, a gift, before separating anything from where it is found."

"Hallllooooo!" Athena, her arms making rapid pinwheeling motions, appears to be urging them up to the next highest ledge. Frances is busy, spit-washing a smudge of uranium off her turquoise shirt.

When the three white women attain the highest ledge, they hold their plastic bags of roots and twigs, panting, confounded by what they see. Inches deep across the ground lay thousands of pottery shards. The women, winded, hot faced, are told

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they are standing on a trash dump, where Anasazi Indians, centuries ago, had thrown their broken pots and garbage.

The Navajo women sit and rest, observe the three white women stooping and bobbing, pecking about for bits of clay, their arms blooming with what they cannot seem to gather up fast enough. At first, the women call back and forth excitedly, then lapse into an almost funereal quiet, the weight of anthropology, the burden of choosing among priceless relics falling almost gloomily upon them. Like children, their greed eventually tires them, and they become aware of the Navajo women, quietly watching. They stop, arms and pockets and bags loaded down, their small congress embarrassed, bits of pottery dropping off them like leaves.

"Perhaps just two or three," says one nurse.

"Those that mean the most," suggests the other.

As Frances sets down her cumbersome pile, Athena, who had wandered off, returns. Between her hands, rests a large, perfect potshard, a black lightning streak down its reddish, curved flank. Exclaiming over its size and near perfect condition, Frances begins to thank Athena, grateful for the largeness of gesture, the love implied.

"It's for Dad," Athena says softly. "I wanted to bring him something."

"Oh." Frances drops to her knees, shuffling through her little clay bits, as if to choose.

"Did you leave an offering?"

"Yuppers. My last cigarette, one I copped from the nurse."

On the ride back, they stop beside a faded sprawl of prickly pear to pick its mushy, red fruits for pink dye. The driving nurse, feeling unwell, decides to drive to the trading post for stomach medicine. Both nurses drop the women back at the hogan except for Athena, who's begged a ride.

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Frances labors alongside her instructor, hefting enamelware kettles and a halved oil drum filled with hauled water, onto

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different fires. She sorts through gathered plant materials, carries bags and baskets of handspun wool skeins out from the hogan, admires Valencia's long, black hair, twisted in a shining bundle at the nape of her neck, noting its resemblance to the skeins of wool, to the little bundles of yarn dangling from the edge of the rug inside the hogan. She wonders how Valencia would raise a daughter, how do the women raise teenagers out here, how, in her own case, could things get much worse.

Swirling the stained waters with an ashy stick, made sleepy by the steam of plants, bitter or sweet smelling, or dense as soured earth, Frances begins to hope Athena might not return until much, much later.

At once she hears the truck, observes it dipping and rising over the rutted gullies, with Athena, cross-legged in the bed of the truck, in a somber corona of dust, brandishing a cigarette. As her daughter trips unsteadily past her, blowing smoke out both nostrils, her maroon hair tangled and shreddy looking, Frances studies the shaven back of her head so disturbingly infantlike, watches her wobble around a cast iron pot of chamisa dye, right herself, then pitch behind one side of the hogan and begin, audibly, to vomit.

One of the nurses comes up to Frances.

"I found this in the truck bed."

Frances stares at the half-empty bottle.

The bottle lodged under her arm, Frances uses a peeled stick to raise out of the water one of the skeins of yarn. It hangs from the end of the willow stick, a twist, an eight, of deep, ardent gold.

•

Worse than finding Athena on the ground, is seeing the rooster, pecking with cold disregard, at her daughter's vomit. Frances is about to kick the rooster, when suddenly, admitting nature's genius, she leaves it to clean the mess Athena has once again made of things.

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"G'way." Athena's tattooed arm takes a sodden, backwards sweep at the air. "G'way, stupid."

Her profile, smooshed into the ground, is a mask of vomit and dirt.

"All right. I will go away. I will go get something to wash your filthy face with. You disappoint me, Athena."

Athena's visible eye stays blearily fixed on the rooster.

Inside the dim, stifling hogan, Frances finds the one available cloth, her pink western bandanna. The only water she knows of is in the white plastic bucket. Biting her bottom lip, plunging her arm deep to wet the bandanna, she has to shake off a burred sleeve of flies. She stands quiet before the loom, an object of great dignity, a pursuit, elusive to Frances, of stillness and purpose. Hadn't she tried to make their marriage like that, into fine cloth, an enduring design?

Balling up the tepid pink bandanna, wringing it hard, she squats behind Athena, turning her head and wiping her soiled face. As she scrubs under her daughter's chin, a muddy backwash of rage hits.

"There." She throws down the stained rag. "You find something to do with that. I'm taking our things to the car. We're going home, not that either of us has much of a home anymore."

As she finishes stuffing the trunk with their few things, Frances hears the nurse, the one who had shown her the half-empty whiskey bottle, behind her.

"Mrs. Waythorn, your daughter took off running that way. If you take the car, you'll catch up to her. It won't be dark for another fifteen minutes."

The woman's voice is so nursely, so merciful, so professionally equipped for trauma, Frances wants to collapse against her ordinary sweatshirt, her calm and practical shoulder. She wants to say, Oh you take care of this, somebody else manage this, I only want to rest.

•

Even in the drought-smeared violet light, Frances easily makes out the skinny speck of her daughter shambling along

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the gravel and dirt road. In the middle of nowhere. Going nowhere.

As her car creeps closer, Frances, seeing Athena's set, miserable profile, does a most unexpected thing. She pumps hard on the accelerator and shoots past her daughter, steering with great angry lurches and radical swerves, up over the crest of a small hill and down.

She stops, exhilarated, considering what she has done. Abandoned her daughter. Gone beyond her. Swooped by. Yes.

Her arch has a dark wetted gash across it. Athena's pot shard, the gift for her father, has rolled off the seat and smashed into pieces around her foot. Frances rests her forehead on the steering wheel. After a long while, she becomes aware of darkness. My God. She switches on the light overhead, lifts up to see the top third of her face in the little mirror. Smeared with dirt, tears, old mascara. Her pants, too, ruined. Her shirt, poisoned with uranium.

Wildly, she feels for the ignition, in a panic, shoves into reverse, backs up the car, coasts down the little hill she's concealed herself behind.

Frances gets out of the car, sees blurrily, a mile or so away, the mercury yard light she had aimed for the night before. Hears, as if it isn't hers anymore, the sound of weeping.

The car light switched on, Frances is on her knees, searching under the seats, trying to gather back pieces of the clay pot. On the day she had been scrubbing down her child's room, on the day of her daughter's arrest, she had found, while on her belly under Athena's bed, a green cardboard shoebox. Inside the shoebox were the souvenirs Frances had kept hidden from everyone. The dry, yellowish triangle of Athena's umbilical cord, a wavy, black shank of her ex-husband's hair, the auburn braid of her mother's hair, cut six months before she'd died, and like twin, eerie rattles, two tiny boxes of Frances's own ivoried baby teeth. Athena, searching through her mother's secret things, had taken, out of instinct or curiosity, all she needed.

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"Ma-mah? What is it? What are you doing?"

"My foot's cut."

"Poorest Mommy. You can't drive, bleeding and crying like that. Shh, shh, okay, shh. I'll help you. Shh."

Stripping off, wrapping the black tank top around her mother's foot, Athena, not bothering to ask, gets her old wish to drive. And as the reservation night covers, uncovers her white, scarcely touched breasts, as her mother guards, unyielding, the broken potshards, bits of hair and dried cord, Athena will piece together a stubborn, defiantly remembered, child's way home.

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Alfred Corn

Insertion Arias

Entering a cave, or stepping outside at night,
artificial blindness, temporary
but absolute. And if I lost sight,
the long-distance sense, the avenue to color,
would speech and music be enough to live on?
No more sunsets filtered through palm branches,
no more plunge of snowflakes into the breakers,
no more mountains overhung with a crush of stars;
no rose window, no pietà, no Yoruba head;
no more meeting your eyes filling up with light.

Stretched out side by side, catching our breath again,
we've listened, as heartbeats subside
and fresh sweat dries, to a solo voice, this
composer or that, Mozart most often, one of his
"insertion arias," say, *Vorrei spiegarvi, oh Dio*,
which was slipped into (because the soprano
demanded something with more fire, more muscle)
an otherwise defunct opera by Anfossi.

Eyes closed, we let intentional sound sink in.
For a while, all we are is a voice
as it steps and glides over textured strings
woven with intermingling woodwinds.
The music's pulse is hard to tell from ours,
and blind attention doubles what it hears.
Dancelike themes and pitched words
in an old language not by me always
translatable replace the "I love you"
we save for times we mean it to the bone.

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Love itself's one of the threats to love,
like the stimulus sustained so long it dims
or goes inaudible. To offer more
than a wide-eyed, unreflective stare,
simple tact at last reverses the scope,
turns inward and finds another you, cocooned
in second nature like a future swallowtail,
safe from judge, senator, or cardinal,
whoever might try to forbid what we feel.

No one keeps years from passing, though,
and I have fifteen more
than you. For the optimum scenario,
a hand-in-hand walk toward embers of a sunset,
likelihood provides no support at all.
Would you accept the proposition
that death puts an end to seeing,
but not to hearing, the lost beloved?
(Rather than the voice per se, its musical
equivalent—a motion, a heartbeat
at the core of things, a penetrating insound.)

This is you beside me now, and the distance
is close or far as we make it.
Not many singers try to manage without
accompaniment, the fulfillment of an outcry—
even if neither fully explains what was meant.
There: the aria's done, translation I hope
provided for; and now I can breathe again.

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Grace Schulman

Bestiaries

1. Animals

Before God created people,
he made animals,
unnamed and marvelous,
that sheltered the weak.
What later would be called
the leviathan
had fins so large
they hid the sun,
and eyes that lit up the sea.
It swallowed only fish
that leaped into its mouth,
spouted water
to frighten sharks,
and shed skins
to cover the poor.
The ziz, ruler of birds,
foresaw battles
and sang with angels;
its eggs, when broken,
flooded cities
and crushed cedars.
There were gentle dolphins,
fireproof salamanders,
shining ravens,
sly foxes, and unicorns
that cured the sick.
They showed us how to live;
best of all, the grasshopper
that trilled all summer long
before it died.

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2. They, Too

After Lewis Thomas

They, too, can tell us what we are,
not like the phoenix, that rises in ashes,
nor by their valor, like the ki-lin,

with its stag body and silver horn,
but because they take things in.
I mean the *myxotricha paradoxa*,

a protozoan made of spirochetes,
organelles, and more besides;
the *mitochondria*, assembled from

bacteria bits; the *blepharisma*,
that eats its neighbors. Unbeautiful,
their names unresonant, they fuse

with other cells, merge, lean, depend;
they show us we rent, share, occupy each other,
and never own, not even ourselves.

Praise them. They will shine like jewels
on the stained-glass windows of cathedrals
along with lambs and birds, rabbits and deer.

3. Stone Demons

Throw back your head and see them
hunt you down Amsterdam
with pop eyes, knifeblade ears,
gaps weathered into scars,
mouths that cry and drain
waterfalls of rain.

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Gargoyles. Bas-reliefs
worn smooth as buffalo nickels.
And carved beasts — no, not beasts
but pied horrors: animals,
men and women, torn
then tacked together again.

Hear them shriek and howl.
One springs from a cornice,
another squats on a wall,
a third has wings, fishtail
and hooves, all at once
to fly, swim, leap and prance.

Cross streets, turn down alleys;
they'll spy you blocks away.
Sages with leafy beards,
kings with fangs, goat ears,
act out court murder scenes
blooded by falling suns.

Hybrid monsters teach us
waking and dreams are one:
our fears, urges and loves
sit high on towers of sandstone,
and poke up from the flat
bedrock of the heart.

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Agha Shahid Ali

A History of Paisley

Their footsteps formed the paisley when Parvati, angry after a quarrel, ran away from Shiva. He eventually caught up with her. To commemorate their reunion, he carved the Jhelum river, as it moves through the Vale of Kashmir, in the shape of the paisley.

You who will find the dark fossils of paisleys
one afternoon on the peaks of Zabarvan—
Trader from an ancient market of the future,
alibi of chronology, that vain
collaborator of time—won't know that these

are her footprints from the day the world began
when land rushed, from the ocean, toward Kashmir.
And above the rising Himalayas? The air
chainstitched itself till the sky hung its bluest
tapestry. But already—as she ran

away—refugee from her Lord—the ruins
of the sea froze, in glaciers, cast in amber.
And there, in the valley below, the river
beguiled its banks into petrified longing:
(O see, it is still the day the world begins:

and the city rises, holding its remains,
its wooden beams already their own fire's prophets.)
And you, now touching sky, deaf to her anklets
still echoing in the valley, deaf to men
fleeing from soldiers into dead-end lanes

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(Look! Their feet bleed; they leave footprints on the street
which will give up its fabric, at dusk, a carpet)—
you have found—you'll think—the first teardrop, gem
that was enticed for a Mughal diadem
into design. For you, blind to all defeat

up there in pure sunlight, your gauze of cloud thrown
off your shoulders over the Vale, do not hear
bullets drowning out the bells of her anklets.
This is her relic, but for you the first tear,
drop that you hold as you descend past flowstone,

past dried springs, on the first day of the world.
The street is rolled up, ready for southern ports.
Your ships wait there. What other cargo is yours?
What cables have you sent to tomorrow's bazaars?
What does that past await: the future unfurled

like flags? news from the last day of the world?
You descend quickly, to a garden-café:
At a table by a bed of tzigane
Roses three men are discussing, between
Sips of tea, undiscovered routes on emerald

Seas, ships with almonds, with shawls bound for Egypt.
It is dusk. The gauze is torn. A weaver kneels,
gathers falling threads. Soon he will stitch the air.
But what has made you turn? Do you hear her bells?
O alibi of chronology, in what script

in your ledger will this narrative be lost?
In that café, where they discuss the promise
of the world, her cry returns from its abyss
where it hides, by the river. They don't hear it.
The city burns; the dusk has darkened to rust

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by the roses. They don't see it. O Trader,
what news will you bring to your ancient market?
I saw her. A city was razed. In its debris
her bells echoed. I turned. They didn't see me
turn to see her—on the peaks—in rapid flight forever.

for Anuradha Dingwaney

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Anne Babson Carter

Three Blocks from San Marco

As evening lifted off the canals
and sounds we couldn't see through,
muffled as a vaporetto moving through water
hung over our plates, over the soaked bread
and the meat from the kitchen,
over the red tile roofs
of this small fish restaurant

like an awning suspended,
we knew they were too magnificent
for husbandry—these three women
whose men were paying them absolute attention.
Clothed in linens as though
suited in pearls or glazes of eggshells
or chalk, they were smoking in voices

we couldn't hear, talking
in clouds so fixedly
that language danced
like feathers in air—like the blooms
off a Venetian sumac-tree—
until one of us spoke
and all humming stopped:

These women are swans. They curve,
long-necked; wearing assurance
that is porcelain white—without
eyebrows; only bone glides

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ovate and gleaming.
Enjoying their nakedness they
might have called to Lohengrin.
In Venice with the children
how could I explain
that to remove something
and leave nothing
satisfies a craving.

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Mike Decker

The River

People walk out of themselves into
the river. The surface
is a sound you can't hear.

Fish pop up, weightless as thoughts,
then plop back as if
they forgot. Women walk out

of their lives into the river; some
hold clothes up like
empty husbands; one shirt

drowns and rises whole, all handless,
reaching, a dream lover
unbuttoned to the waist. Gray

rocks appear and disappear farther
offshore; they spume
in the dark current like

a lost school of huge illusions. Ah
people walk right out
of themselves into the wide

river to hold what cannot be held
for long; they kneel
down into reflected clouds

or splash luminance on their bodies
until they are new
and they turn and they shine.

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Stella Johnston

Julian

My beloved Helios is leaving, see
how the hem of his robe slips from the tent
as Chaos' daughter approaches, such
sublime generosity from which they lend
proportion to our world; and it is
our world, Maximus, never theirs who
would call it a mere dominion, our days
but work, our nights but simple sleep,
our lives but weary prologue to the most
dismal eternity ever imagined. I gave
them more Sisyphus than they wanted,
though, didn't I, when I took our temples

back. When they wept and complained I
reminded them of how their own gospels
teach them to bear suffering with patience
like their own pacific martyr. These
two years since Constantius' deadly fever,
we've seen the old altars uncovered. No
crackers, sips of wine, delicate gesturings
over embroidered silk but cattle, goats, sheep,
the thrusted ritual blade, the naked stone
surface overflowing with blood. The priests
called it a disgusting mess. I called it
the grandeur of the human soul in immortal

union with divine love and sent the meat
out to the poor. But you, dearest friend,
of all people understand the spirit's
hunger. "If the Greek is stirred by art,
the Egyptian by an animal, or another

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by a river or a fire, let each," you said,
"behold God's essence in what is beautiful
in the world." Who else could have convinced
Constantius' dogs not to murder me, but
to send me into exile, and where else
but to the very groves that once heard
Plato's voice. You took me to Eleusis.

When I finally came up, my face
streaked, my mouth and fingers stained
pomegranite red, you gave me barley-water
flavored with mint and said, "Drink
always from the cup of sorrow and remember
what we are." Tell me now, Maximus, what
am I if not the happiest of men? But
you must see to yourself. There are
no more vicious beasts than Christians.
Jovian, you know, will succeed me and the grave
theologians are going to nail their sallow,
watered-down Osiris up everywhere they can.

They would take death herself away
from nature. Why, just imagine a deity
who would think his own children lucky
to be shut into a garden, the one thing
that lends order to the human mind
dangling there deliciously before them,
vibrant with promise, along with another
that, once partaken of, would make them
equal to himself, tell them *eat of all
else but these two*, and then, finally,
when, teased beyond belief, they disobey,
blame it on a snake! But Helios is calling;

my light must be added. Down invisible stairs
the fire travels until all is radiance,
even the homeliest of things. Take this

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javelin, for instance. Look how worn
the grip, how ground away the point
from being sharpened over and over
before battle, how washed-out its Persian
decorations. How far from its maker it
has come only to reveal so little of itself.
How naturally it darkens with my blood.
Now give me a drink of water. Here's
to all that's done but still unfinished.

Take my hand. The Gods can never die.

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Jordan Smith

The Dream of Horses

It began with the deer, dead in the water
Just off my parents' dock,
And then there was a procession of horses,
The water churning around their necks
As they struck out for the island,
Circled it, headed back,
And I was in the water with them.

I thought, how clumsy dreams are:
I was taking my kids to a draft-horse show the next day,
I knew that cabin on the lake
Was the last dear place
My parents would manage to make for themselves,
And who needs to explain
The beauty and power of horses
Out of their element,
Or in it—that "realm of the mothers,"
The lacustrine trope
Of return.

Maybe it was the passing of my parents
Finally back into my childhood version of them—
Beauty, power—
And maybe it was the stall
I felt in my own life just then,
An unwillingness
To face up to anything beyond a day's routine,
Or just the anticipation
Of a day spent with children
In the large peace of work animals.

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But none of this makes sense of what I knew,
Caught in the swirl of water around the dappled shoulders
And lifted heads, the purposeful
Silence of swimming horses.

I knew that my death meant nothing,
Although there were no words to appease my wonder at it.

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Portfolio

Enamel on Aluminum

Michael Scott

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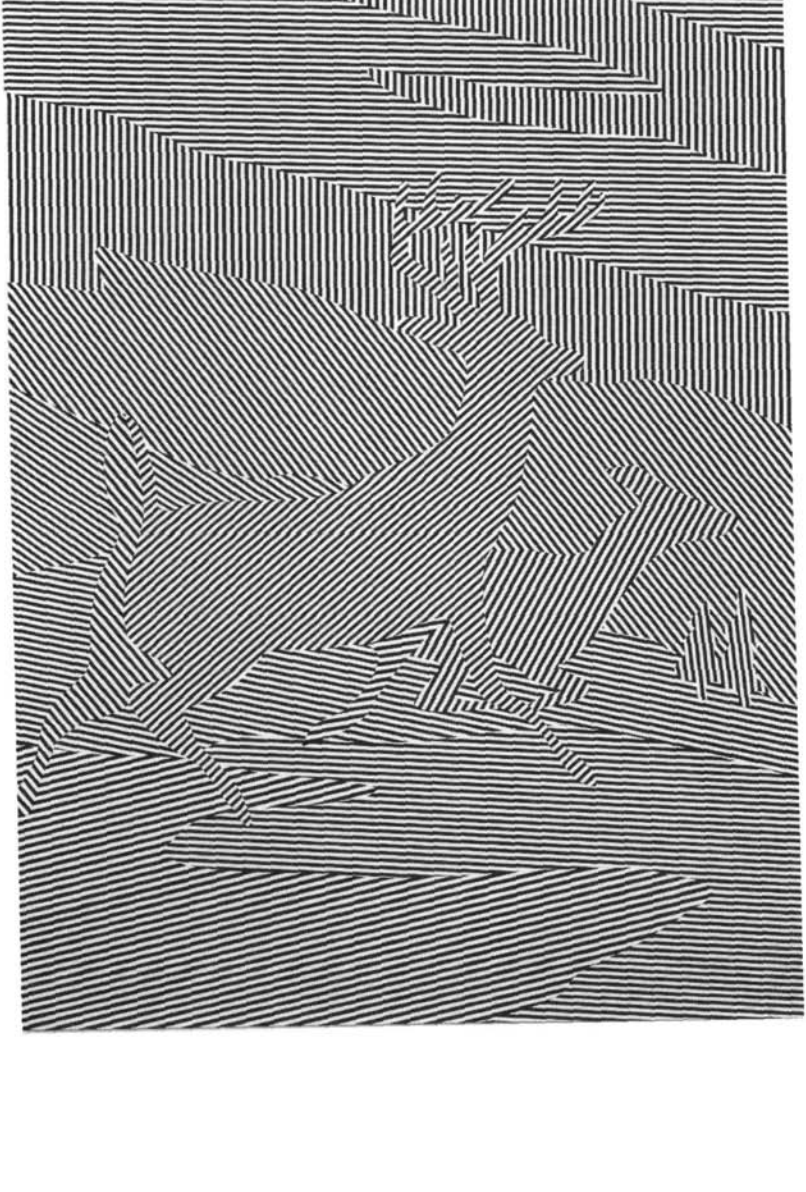

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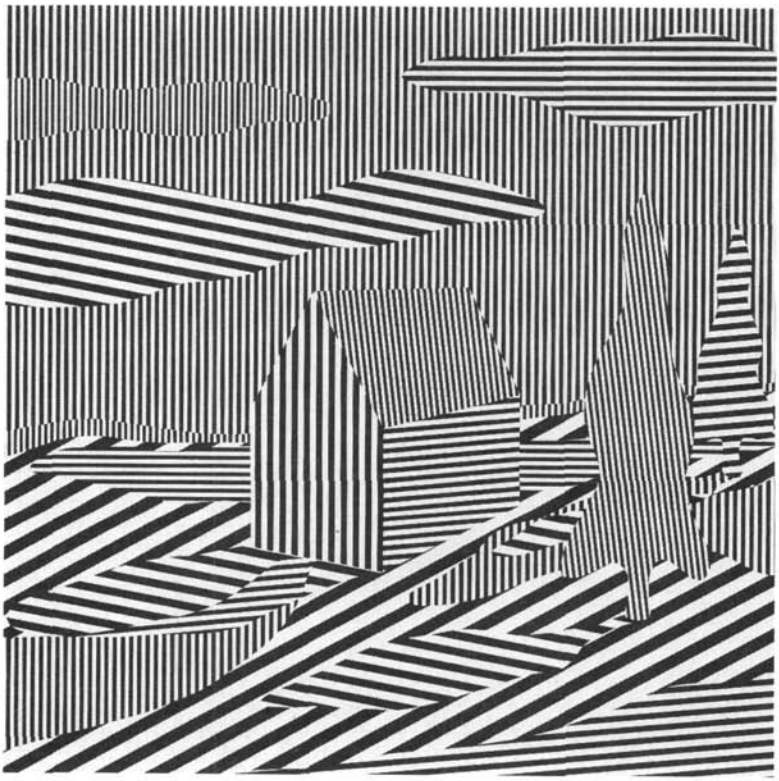

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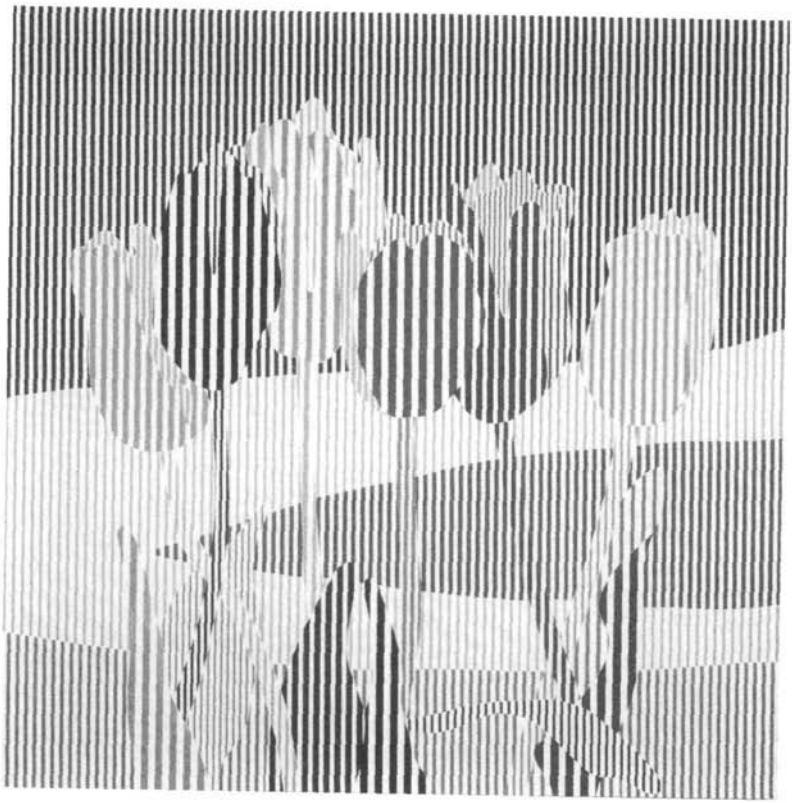

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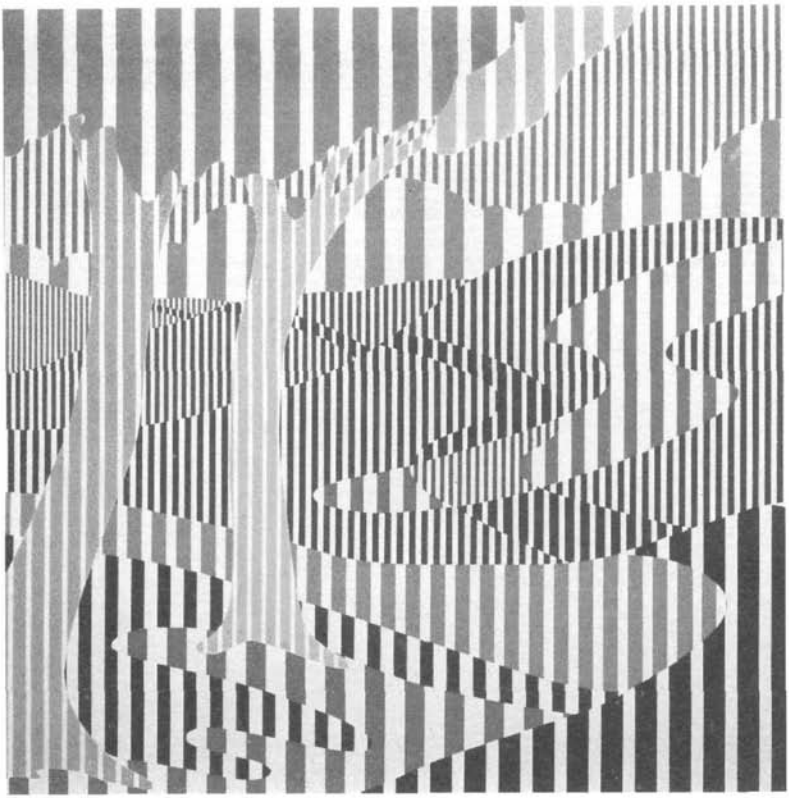

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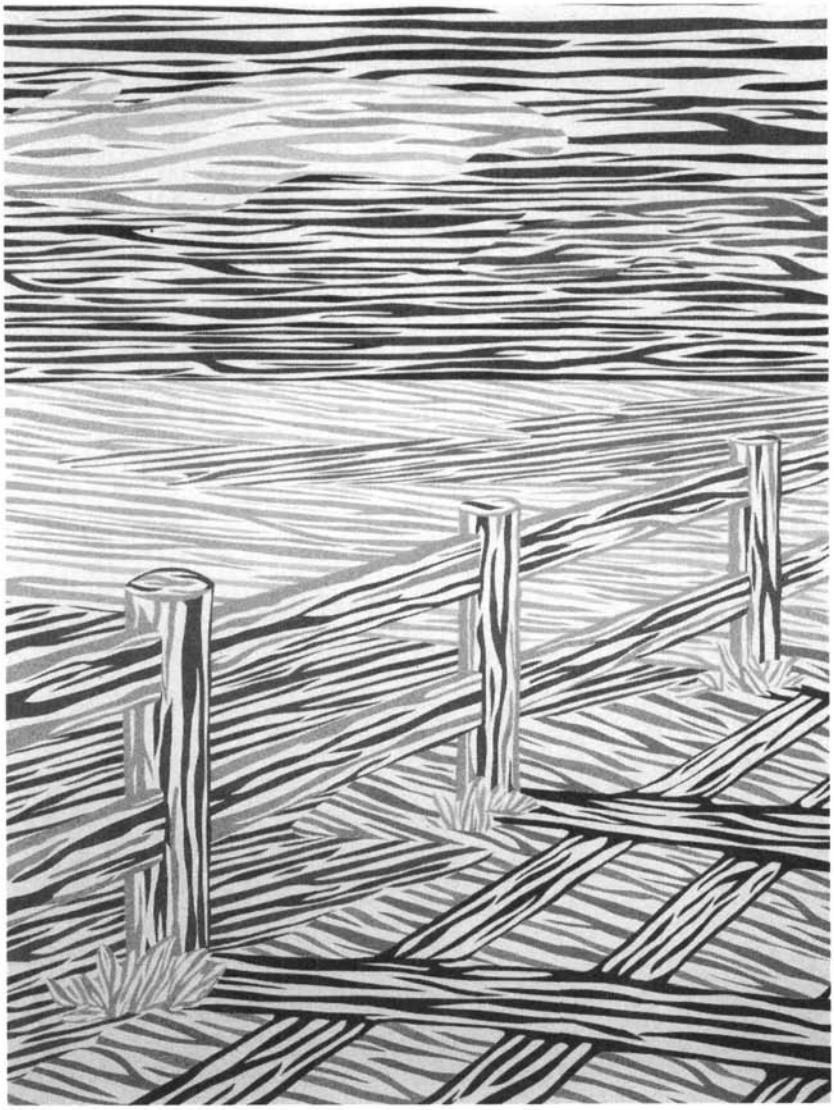

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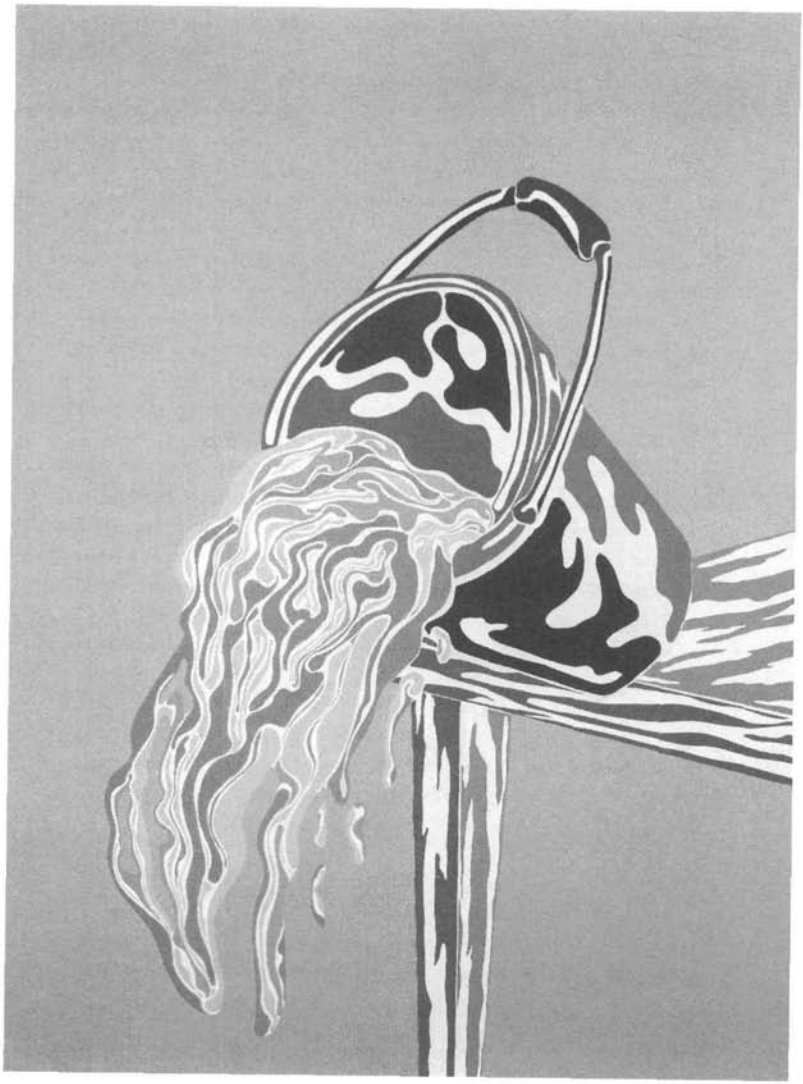

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and suchlike dreary stuff. And thank the Lord, one of them was a divinity student. A different kind of young man went into the church in those days if you remember. Good-looking and ambitious, rather the type who might go into politics now. This one was set to be a success. He wasn't so far out of the family influence as to speak up first, at his father's table, but once I spoke to him, he started to talk. He could even step in and answer for the others when they could not. For at least a couple of them absolutely could not. She's helping at home, he'd say. or, He's in the second form.

We had a chat about Toronto, where he was going to Knox College. The number of motor-cars there, a trip to ~~Toronto Island, the mummy~~ Hanlan's Point, the giraffe in the Riverdale Zoo ~~Museum~~. He seemed to want to let me know that the divinity regulations were not too stringent. He went ~~skating in the winter~~ tobogganing in High Park. He had been to see a play. We could have talked on, but were defeated by the silence around us, or rather the speechlessness, for there was clinking and chewing and swallowing. Conversation could seem affected here, pure clatter and self-display. It seemed as if all the social rules I had been brought up with were turned on their heads. I even began to wonder if they suffered as I had thought, if they didn't have an altogether different idea than I had, of what this dinner should be. A ceremony. Where everything was done right. Where everything had taken a lot of work and was done right. I could see that conversation might seem bewildering, unnecessary. Even ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ disrespectful. I could see myself as a giddy sort of foreigner, embarrassing them, and I could see that the divinity student was embarrassing them, in a way, by being willing to keep me company. So I dried up, and he did too. Everybody managed to eat a lot. Especially the two oldsters, I thought. They munched along in a kind of eating trance. Uncle Clarence was a picky eater, a hot-cereal-and-cream-of-wheat or a soft-boiled-egg kind of a man.

I went out to the kitchen afterwards offering to help with the dishes, thinking that was what you did on the farm, but of course they were not having any of me. They wouldn't let your uncle's wife do anything ~~but she must have~~

A manuscript page from Alice Munro's story "Wilderness Station."

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Alice Munro

The Art of Fiction CXXXVII

There is no direct flight from New York City to Clinton, Ontario, the Canadian town of three thousand where Alice Munro lives most of the year. We left LaGuardia early on a June morning, rented a car in Toronto and drove for three hours on roads that grew smaller and more rural. Around dusk, we pulled up to the house where Munro lives with her second husband, Gerry Fremlin. It has a deep backyard and an eccentric flower garden and is, as she explained, the house where Fremlin was born. In the kitchen, Munro was preparing

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a simple meal with fragrant local herbs. The dining room is lined floor to ceiling with books: at one side a small table holds a manual typewriter. It is here that Munro works.

After a while, Munro took us to Goderich, a bigger town, the county seat, where she installed us in the Bedford Hotel on the square across from the courthouse. The hotel is a nineteenth-century building with comfortable rooms (twin beds and no air-conditioning) that would seem to lodge a librarian or a frontier schoolteacher in one of Munro's stories. Over the next three days, we talked in her home, but never with the tape recorder on. We conducted the interview in our small room at the hotel, as Munro wanted to keep "the business out of the house." Both Munro and her husband grew up within twenty miles of where they now live; they knew the history of almost every building we passed, admired or ate inside. We asked what sort of literary community was available in the immediate area. Although there is a library in Goderich, we were told the nearest good bookstore was in Stratford, some thirty miles away. When we asked whether there were any other local writers, she drove us past a ramshackle house where a man sat bare chested on the back stoop, crouched over a typewriter, surrounded by cats. "He's out there every day," she said. "Rain or shine. I don't know him, but I'm dying of curiosity to find out what he's up to."

Our last morning in Canada, supplied with directions, we sought out the house in which Alice Munro had grown up. Her father had built the house and raised mink there. After several dead ends, we found it, a pretty brick house at the very end of a country road, facing an open field where an airplane rested, alighted temporarily it seemed. It was, from our spot, easy to imagine the glamor of the air, the pilot taking a country wife away, as in "White Dump," or the young aviation stuntsman who lands in a field like this in "How I Met My Husband."

Like the house, like the landscape of Ontario, which resembles the American Midwest, Munro is not imposing. She is gracious, with a quiet humor. She is the author of seven books

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of short stories, including the forthcoming Open Secrets, *and one novel,* Lives of Girls and Women*; she has received the Governor-General's Award (Canada's most prestigious literary prize) and is regularly featured in* Best American Short Stories *(Richard Ford recently included two Alice Munro stories in the volume he edited.) and* Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*; she also is a regular contributor to* The New Yorker. *Despite these considerable accomplishments, Munro still speaks of writing with some of the reverence and insecurity one hears in the voices of beginners. She has none of the bravura or bluster of a famous writer, and it is easy to forget that she is one. Speaking of her own work, she makes what she does sound not exactly easy, but possible, as if anyone could do it if they only worked hard enough. As we left, we felt that contagious sense of possibility. It seems simple—but her writing has a perfect simplicity that takes years and many drafts to master. As Cynthia Ozick has said, "She is our Chekhov and is going to outlast most of her contemporaries."*

INTERVIEWER

We went back to the house where you grew up this morning. Did you live there your entire childhood?

ALICE MUNRO

Yes. When my father died, he was still living in that house on the farm, which was a fox and mink farm. It's changed a lot though. Now it's a beauty parlor called Total Indulgence. I think they have the beauty parlor in the back wing, and they've knocked down the kitchen entirely.

INTERVIEWER

Have you been inside it since then?

MUNRO

No I haven't, but I thought if I did I'd ask to see the living room. There's the fireplace my father built and I'd like to see

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that. I've sometimes thought I should go in and ask for a manicure.

INTERVIEWER

We noticed a plane on the field across the road and thought of your stories "White Dump" and "How I Met My Husband."

MUNRO

Yes, that was an airport for a while. The man who owned that farm had a hobby of flying planes, and he had a little plane of his own. He never liked farming so he got out of it and became a flight instructor. He's still alive. In perfect health and one of the handsomest men I've ever known. He retired from flight instruction when he was seventy-five. Within maybe three months of retirement he went on a trip and got some odd disease you get from bats in caves.

INTERVIEWER

The stories in your first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades,* are very resonant of that area, the world of your childhood. At what point in your life were those stories written?

MUNRO

The writing of those stories stretched over fifteen years. "The Day of the Butterfly" was the earliest one. That was probably written when I was about twenty-one. And I can remember very well writing "Thanks For the Ride" because my first baby was lying in the crib beside me. So I was twenty-two. The really late stories were written in my thirties. "Dance of the Happy Shades" is one, "The Peace of Utrecht" is another. "Images" is the very latest. "Walker Brothers Cowboy" was also written after I was thirty. So there's a really great range.

INTERVIEWER

How do they seem to hold up now? Do you reread them?

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MUNRO

There's an early one in that collection called "The Shining Houses," which I had to read at Harborfront in Toronto two or three years ago for a special event celebrating the history of *Tamarack Review*. Since it was originally published in one of the early issues of that magazine, I had to get up and read it, and it was very hard. I think I wrote that story when I was twenty-two. I kept editing as I read, catching all the tricks I used at that time, which now seemed very dated. I was trying to fix it up fast, with my eyes darting ahead to the next paragraph as I read, because I hadn't read it ahead of time. I never do read things ahead of time. When I read an early story I can see things I wouldn't do now, things people were doing in the fifties.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever revise a story after it's been published? Apparently, before he died, Proust rewrote the first volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past*.

MUNRO

Yes, and Henry James rewrote simple, understandable stuff so it was obscure and difficult. Actually I've done it recently. The story "Carried Away" was included in *Best American Short Stories 1991*. I read it again in the anthology, because I wanted to see what it was like and I found a paragraph that I thought was really soggy. It was a very important little paragraph, maybe two sentences. I just took a pen and rewrote it up in the margin of the anthology so that I'd have it there to refer to when I published the story in book form. I've often made revisions at that stage that turned out to be mistakes because I wasn't really in the rhythm of the story anymore. I see a little bit of writing that doesn't seem to be doing as much work as it should be doing, and right at the end I will sort of rev it up. But when I finally read the story again it seems a bit obtrusive. So I'm not too sure about this sort of thing. The answer may be that one should stop this behavior. There

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should be a point where you say, the way you would with a child, this isn't mine anymore.

INTERVIEWER

You've mentioned that you don't show your work in progress to friends.

MUNRO

No, I don't show anything in progress to anybody.

INTERVIEWER

How much do you rely on your editors?

MUNRO

The New Yorker was really my first experience with serious editing. Previously I'd more or less just had copyediting with a few suggestions—not much. There has to be an agreement between the editor and me about the kind of thing that can happen. An editor who thought nothing happened in William Maxwell's stories, for example, would be of no use to me. There also has to be a very sharp eye for the ways that I could be deceiving myself. Chip McGrath at *The New Yorker* was my first editor, and he was so good. I was amazed that anybody could see that deeply into what I wanted to do. Sometimes we didn't do much, but occasionally he gave me a lot of direction. I rewrote one story called "The Turkey Season," which he had already bought. I thought he would simply accept the new version but he didn't. He said, "Well, there are things about the new version I like better, and there are things about the old version I like better. Why don't we see?" He never says anything like, *We will*. So we put it together and got a better story that way, I think.

INTERVIEWER

How was this accomplished? By phone or by mail? Do you ever go into *The New Yorker* and hammer it out?

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MUNRO

By mail. We have a very fruitful phone relationship, but we've only seen each other a few times.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first publish in *The New Yorker*?

MUNRO

"Royal Beatings" was my first story, and it was published in 1977. But I sent all my early stories to *The New Yorker* in the 1950s, and then I stopped sending for a long time and sent only to magazines in Canada. *The New Yorker* sent me nice notes though—penciled, informal messages. They never signed them. They weren't terribly encouraging. I still remember one of them: "The writing is very nice, but the theme is a bit overly familiar." It was, too. It was a romance between two aging people—an aging spinster who knows this is it for her when she's proposed to by an aging farmer. I had a lot of aging spinsters in my stories. It was called "The Day the Asters Bloomed." It was really awful. And I didn't write this when I was seventeen; I was twenty-five. I wonder why I wrote about aging spinsters. I didn't know any.

INTERVIEWER

And you married young. It's not as though you were anticipating a life as an aging spinster.

MUNRO

I think I knew that at heart I was an aging spinster.

INTERVIEWER

Were you always writing?

MUNRO

Since about grade seven or eight.

INTERVIEWER

Were you a serious writer by the time you went to college?

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MUNRO

Yes. I had no chance to be anything else because I had no money. I knew I would only be at university two years because the scholarships available at that time lasted only two years. It was this little vacation in my life, a wonderful time. I had been in charge of the house at home when I was in my teens, so university was about the only time in my life that I haven't had to do housework.

INTERVIEWER

Did you get married right after your two years?

MUNRO

I got married right after the second year. I was twenty. We went to Vancouver. That was the big thing about getting married: this huge adventure, moving. As far away as we could get and stay in the country. We were only twenty and twenty-two. We immediately set up a very proper kind of middle-class existence. We were thinking of getting a house and having a baby, and we promptly did these things. I had my first baby at twenty-one.

INTERVIEWER

And you were writing all through that?

MUNRO

I was writing desperately all the time I was pregnant because I thought I would never be able to write afterwards. Each pregnancy spurred me to get something big done before the baby was born. Actually I didn't get anything big done.

INTERVIEWER

In "Thanks For the Ride," you write from the point of view of a rather callous city boy who picks up a poor town girl for the night and sleeps with her and is alternately attracted to and revolted by the poverty of her life. It seems striking that this story came from a time when your life was so settled and proper.

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MUNRO

A friend of my husband's came to visit us the summer when I was pregnant with my eldest daughter. He stayed for a month or so. He worked for the National Film Board, and he was doing a film up there. He told us a lot of stuff—we just talked the way you do, anecdotally about our lives. He told the story about being in a small town on Georgian Bay and going out with a local girl. It was the encounter of a middle-class boy with something that was quite familiar to me but not familiar to him. So I immediately identified strongly with the girl and her family and her situation, and I guess I wrote the story fairly soon afterwards because my baby was looking at me from the crib.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you when that first book came out?

MUNRO

I was about thirty-six. I'd been writing these stories over the years and finally an editor at Ryerson Press, a Canadian publisher that has since been taken over by McGraw-Hill, wrote and asked me if I had enough stories for a book. Originally he was going to put me in a book with two or three other writers. That fell through, but he still had a bunch of my stories. Then he quit but passed me onto another editor, who said, "If you could write three more stories, we'd have a book." And so I wrote "Images," "Walker Brothers Cowboy" and "Postcard" during the last year before the book was published.

INTERVIEWER

Did you publish those stories in magazines?

MUNRO

Most of them got into *Tamarack Review*. It was a nice little magazine, a very brave magazine. The editor said he was the only editor in Canada who knew all his readers by their first names.

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INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had a specific time to write?

MUNRO

When the kids were little, my time was as soon as they left for school. So I worked very hard in those years. My husband and I owned a bookstore, and even when I was working there, I stayed at home until noon. I was supposed to be doing housework, and I would also do my writing then. Later on, when I wasn't working everyday in the store, I would write until everybody came home for lunch and then after they went back, probably till about 2:30, and then I would have a quick cup of coffee and start doing the housework, trying to get it all done before late afternoon.

INTERVIEWER

What about before the girls were old enough to go to school?

MUNRO

Their naps.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote when they had naps?

MUNRO

Yes. From one to three in the afternoon. I wrote a lot of stuff that wasn't any good, but I was fairly productive. The year I wrote my second book, *Lives of Girls and Women*, I was enormously productive. I had four kids because one of the girls' friends was living with us, and I worked in the store two days a week. I used to work until maybe one o'clock in the morning and then get up at six. And I remember thinking, "You know, maybe I'll *die*, this is terrible, I'll have a heart attack." I was only about thirty-nine or so, but I was thinking this; then I thought, "Well even if I do, I've got that many pages written now. They can see how it's going to come out." It was a kind of desperate, desperate race. I don't have that kind of energy now.

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INTERVIEWER

What was the process involved in writing *Lives*?

MUNRO

I remember the day I started to write that. It was in January, a Sunday. I went down to the bookstore, which wasn't open Sundays, and locked myself in. My husband had said he would get dinner, so I had the afternoon. I remember looking around at all the great literature that was around me and thinking, "You fool! What are you doing here?" But then I went up to the office and started to write the section called "Princess Ida," which is about my mother. The material about my mother is my central material in life, and it always comes the most readily to me. If I just relax, that's what will come up. So, once I started to write that, I was off. Then I made a big mistake. I tried to make it a regular novel, an ordinary sort of childhood adolescence novel. About March I saw it wasn't working. It didn't feel right to me, and I thought I would have to abandon it. I was very depressed. Then it came to me that what I had to do was pull it apart and put it in the story form. Then I could handle it. That's when I learned that I was never going to write a real novel because I could not think that way.

INTERVIEWER

The Beggar Maid, too, is a sort of a novel because it's interconnected stories.

MUNRO

I don't want to second-guess things too much, but I've often wanted to do another series of stories. In my new book, *Open Secrets*, there are characters who reappear. Bea Doud in "Vandals" is mentioned as the little girl in "Carried Away," which is the first story I wrote for the collection. Billy Doud is the son of the librarian. They're all mentioned in "Spaceships Have Landed." But I mustn't let this sort of plan overtake the stories themselves. If I start shaping one story so it will fit with

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another, I am probably doing something wrong, using force on it that I oughtn't. So I don't know that I'll ever do that kind of series again, though I love the idea of it. Katherine Mansfield said something in one of her letters like, "Oh, I hope I write a novel, I hope I don't die just leaving these bits and pieces." It's very hard to wean yourself away from this bits-and-pieces feeling if all you're leaving behind is scattered stories. I'm sure you could think of Chekhov and everything, but still.

INTERVIEWER

And Chekhov always wanted to write a novel. He was going to call it "Stories from the Lives of my Friends."

MUNRO

I know. And I know that feeling that you could have this achievement of having put everything into one package.

INTERVIEWER

When you start writing a story do you already know what the story will be? Is it already plotted out?

MUNRO

Not altogether. Any story that's going to be any good is usually going to change. Right now I'm starting a story cold. I've been working on it every morning, and it's pretty slick. I don't really like it, but I think maybe, at some point, I'll be into it. Usually, I have a lot of acquaintance with the story before I start writing it. When I didn't have regular time to give to writing, stories would just be working in my head for so long that when I started to write I was deep into them. Now, I do that work by filling notebooks.

INTERVIEWER

You use notebooks?

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MUNRO

I have stacks of notebooks that contain this terribly clumsy writing, which is just getting anything down. I often wonder, when I look at these first drafts, if there was any point in doing this at all. I'm the opposite of a writer with a quick gift, you know, someone who gets it piped in. I don't grasp it very readily at all, the "it" being whatever I'm trying to do. I often get on the wrong track and have to haul myself back.

INTERVIEWER

How do you realize you're on the wrong track?

MUNRO

I could be writing away one day, and think I've done very well, I've done more pages than I usually do. Then I get up the next morning and realize I don't want to work on it anymore. When I have a terrible reluctance to go near it, when I would have to push myself to continue, I generally know that something is badly wrong. Often, in about three quarters of what I do, I reach a point somewhere, fairly early on, when I think I'm going to abandon this story. I get myself through a day or two of bad depression, grouching around. And I think of something else I can write. It's sort of like a love affair: you're getting out of all the disappointment and misery by going out with some new man you don't really like at all, but you haven't noticed that yet. Then, I will suddenly come up with something about the story that I abandoned. I will see how to do it. But that only seems to happen after I've said, "No, this isn't going to work, forget it."

INTERVIEWER

Can you always do that?

MUNRO

Sometimes I can't, and I spend the whole day in a very bad mood. That's the only time I'm really irritable. If Gerry talks to me or keeps going in and out of the room or bangs around

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a lot, I am on edge and enraged. And if he sings or something like that, it's terrible. I'm trying to think something through, and I'm just running into brick walls, I'm not getting through it. Generally I'll do that for a while before I'll give it up. This whole process might take up to a week, the time of trying to think it through, trying to retrieve it, then giving it up and thinking about something else, and then getting it back, usually quite unexpectedly, when I'm in the grocery store or out for a drive. I'll think, Oh well, I have to do it from the point of view of so-and-so, and I have to cut this character out, and of course these people are not married, or whatever. The big change, which is usually the radical change.

INTERVIEWER

. . . that makes the story work?

MUNRO

I don't even know if it makes the story better. What it does is make it possible for me to continue to write. That's what I mean by saying I don't think I have this overwhelming thing that comes in and dictates to me. I only seem to get a grasp on what I want to write about with the greatest difficulty. And barely.

INTERVIEWER

Do you often change perspective or tone?

MUNRO

Oh yes, sometimes I'm uncertain, and I will do first person to third over and over again. This is one of my major problems. I often do first person to get myself into a story and then feel that for some reason it isn't working. I'm quite vulnerable to what people tell me to do at that point. My agent didn't like the first person in "The Albanian Virgin," which I think, since I wasn't perfectly sure anyway, made me change it. But then I changed it back to first again.

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INTERVIEWER

How consciously, on a thematic level, do you understand what you're doing?

MUNRO

Well, it's not very conscious. I can see the ways a story could go wrong. I see the negative things more easily than the positive things. Some stories don't work as well as others, and some stories are lighter in conception than others.

INTERVIEWER

Lighter?

MUNRO

They *feel* lighter to me. I don't feel a big commitment to them. I've been reading Muriel Sparks's autobiography. She thinks, because she is a Christian, a Catholic, that God is the real author. And it behooves us not to try to take over that authority, not to try to write fiction which is about the meaning of life, which tries to grasp what only God can grasp. So one writes entertainments. I think this is what she says. I think I write stories sometimes that I intend as entertainments.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give an example?

MUNRO

Well I think that "Jack Randa Hotel," which I quite like, works as an entertainment. I want it to, anyway. Although a story like "Friend of my Youth" does not work as an entertainment. It works in some other way. It works at my deepest level.

INTERVIEWER

Do you agonize just as much over those pieces you consider "entertainments" as over your central material?

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MUNRO

Yes, that's true.

INTERVIEWER

Are there stories that haven't been any trouble at all to write?

MUNRO

I actually wrote "Friend of my Youth" very quickly. From an anecdote. There is a young man I know who works in the library in Goderich and researches things for me. He was at our house one night and he began to talk about neighbors of his family, neighbors who lived on the next farm. They belonged to a religion that forbade them to play card games, and so they played Crokinole, which is a board game. He just told me about that, and then I asked him about the family, their religion, what they were like. He described these people and then told me about the marriage scandal: the young man who comes along who is a member of their church, and gets engaged to the older daughter. Then, low and behold, the *younger* sister was pregnant so the marriage has to be switched. And they go on all living together in the same house. The stuff about fixing the house, painting it over is all true too. The couple painted their half, and the older sister didn't; half the house got painted.

INTERVIEWER

Was there really a nurse?

MUNRO

No, the nurse I invented, but I was given the name. We had a fund-raising event at the Blyth Theater, about ten miles away from here. Everybody contributed something to be auctioned off to raise money, and somebody came up with the idea that I could auction off the right to have the successful bidder's name used for a character in my next story. A woman from Toronto paid four hundred dollars to be a character.

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Her name was Audrey Atkinson. I suddenly thought, that's the nurse! I never heard from her. I hope she didn't mind.

INTERVIEWER

What was the inception of that story?

MUNRO

When I started to write the story we were on one of our trips from Ontario to British Columbia; we drive out every year in fall and drive back in spring. So I wasn't writing, but I was thinking about this family in the motels at night. Then the whole story of my mother closed around it, and then me telling the story closed around my mother, and I saw what it was about. I would say that story came easily. I didn't have any difficulty. I've done the character of my mother so often, and my feelings towards her, I didn't have to look for those.

INTERVIEWER

You have several mothers in your work. That particular mother appears in other stories, and she seems very real. But so does Flo, Rose's stepmother in "The Beggar Maid."

MUNRO

But Flo wasn't a real person. She was someone very like people I've known, but she was one of these composite characters that writers talk about. I think Flo was a force because I wrote that story when I had just come back to live here after being away for twenty-three years. The whole culture here hit me with a tremendous bang. I felt that the world I had been using, the world of my childhood, was a glazed-over world of memory once I came back and confronted the real thing. Flo was an embodiment of the real thing, so much harsher than I had remembered.

INTERVIEWER

You obviously travel a great deal, but your work seems fundamentally informed by a rural sensibility. Do you find

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that stories you hear around here are more resonant for you, or did you use just as much material from your life when you lived in cities?

MUNRO

When you live in a small town you hear more things, about all sorts of people. In a city you mainly hear stories about your own sort of people. If you're a woman there's always a lot from your friends. I got "Differently" from my life in Victoria, and a lot of "White Dump." I got the story "Fits" from a real and terrible incident that happened here—the murder-suicide of a couple in their sixties. In a city, I would only have read about it in the paper; I wouldn't have picked up all the threads.

INTERVIEWER

Is it easier for you to invent things or to do composites?

MUNRO

I'm doing less personal writing now than I used to for a very simple obvious reason. You use up your childhood, unless you're able, like William Maxwell, to keep going back and finding wonderful new levels in it. The deep, personal material of the latter half of your life is your children. You can write about your parents when they're gone, but your children are still going to be here, and you're going to want them to come and visit you in the nursing home. Maybe it's advisable to move on to writing those stories which are more observation.

INTERVIEWER

Unlike your family stories, a number of your stories could be called historical. Do you ever go looking for this kind of material or do you just wait for it to turn up?

MUNRO

I never have a problem with finding material. I wait for it to turn up, and it always turns up. It's dealing with the material I'm inundated with that poses the problem. For the historical

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pieces I have had to search out a lot of facts. I knew for years that I wanted to write a story about one of the Victorian lady writers, one of the authoresses of this area. Only I couldn't find quite the verse I wanted; all of it was so bad that it was ludicrous. I wanted to have it a little better than that. So *I* wrote it. When I was writing that story I looked in a lot of old newspapers, the kind of stuff my husband has around—he does historical research about Huron County, our part of Ontario. He's a retired geographer. I got very strong images of the town, which I call Walley. I got very strong images from newspaper clippings. Then, when I needed specific stuff, I'd sometimes get the man at the library to do it for me. To find out things about old cars or something like that, or the Presbyterian church in the 1850s. He's wonderful. He loves doing it.

INTERVIEWER

What about those aunts, the wonderful aunts who appear.

MUNRO

My great aunt and my grandmother were very important in our lives. After all, my family lived on this collapsing enterprise of a fox and mink farm, just beyond the most disreputable part of town, and *they* lived in real town, in a nice house, and they kept up civilization. So there was always tension between their house and ours, but it was very important that I had that. I loved it when I was a little girl. Then, when I was an adolescent, I felt rather burdened by it. My mother was not in the role of the lead female in my life by that time, though she was an enormously important person; she wasn't there as the person who set the standards anymore. So these older women moved into that role, and though they didn't set any standards that I was at all interested in, there was a constant tension there that was important to me.

INTERVIEWER

Then you didn't actually move into town as the mother and daughter do in "Lives of Girls and Women"?

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MUNRO

We did for one winter. My mother decided she wanted to rent a house in town for one winter, and she did. And she gave the ladies' luncheon party, she tried to break into society, which was totally impenetrable to her. She couldn't do it. There was just no understanding there. I do remember coming back to the farmhouse that had been occupied by men, my father and my brother, and you couldn't see the pattern on the linoleum anymore. It seemed as if mud had flowed into the house.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a story you like that others don't? Are there any stories your husband doesn't like for instance?

MUNRO

I liked "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink" a lot, but Gerry didn't like that story. It was from anecdotes he'd told me about his childhood, so I think he expected them to come out quite differently. Because I thought he would like it; I didn't have qualms. And then he said, "Well, not one of your best." That's the only time we ever had trouble about anything I wrote. Since then he's been really careful about not reading something until I'm away, and then if he likes it he will mention it, but maybe he won't mention it at all. I think that's the way you have to manage in a marriage.

INTERVIEWER

Gerry's from here, less than twenty miles from where you grew up. Are his anecdotes and his memories more useful to you than those of Jim, your first husband?

MUNRO

No, Jim was from near Toronto. But he was from a very different background. He lived in a sort of upper middle-class commuter town where most of the men worked in Toronto and were professional. Cheever wrote about towns like that

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around New York. I'd never known people of this class before, so the way they thought about things was interesting as hell, but it wasn't anecdotal. I guess I was too hostile for a long time to appreciate it; I was more left-wing then. Whereas the things that Gerry tells me are further extensions of all the stuff I remember from growing up—though there's an entire difference between a boy's life in town and a girl's life on the farm. The greatest part of Gerry's life was probably between the ages of seven and fourteen, when the boys roamed the town in gangs. They weren't delinquents or anything, but they did more or less as they pleased, like a subculture within the town. Girls were not part of that, I don't think ever. We were always in little knots of girlfriends, we just didn't have the freedom. So it was interesting to learn all this.

INTERVIEWER

How long did you live outside of this region?

MUNRO

I got married the end of 1951, went to live in Vancouver and stayed there until 1963, and then we moved to Victoria where we started our bookstore, Munro's. And I came back, I think it would be, in the summer of 1973. So I had only been ten years in Victoria. I was married for twenty years.

INTERVIEWER

Did you move back east because you met Gerry, or for work?

MUNRO

For work. And also because I had been living with my first husband in Victoria for ten years. The marriage was unraveling for a year or two. It's a small city. You have a circle of friends who all know each other, and it seems to me that if a marriage is breaking up, it's very hard to stay in the same environment. I thought it would be better for us, and he couldn't leave because he had the bookstore. I got an offer of a job teaching creative writing at York University outside of Toronto. But I

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didn't last at that job at all. I hated it, and even though I had no money, I quit.

INTERVIEWER

Because you didn't like teaching fiction?

MUNRO

No! It was terrible. This was 1973. York was one of the more radical Canadian universities, yet my class was all male except for one girl who hardly got to speak. They were doing what was fashionable at the time, which had to do with being both incomprehensible and trite; they seemed intolerant of anything else. It was good for me to learn to shout back and express some ideas about writing that I hadn't sharpened up before, but I didn't know how to reach them, how not to be an adversary. Maybe I'd know now. But it didn't seem to have anything to do with writing—more like good training for going into television or something, getting really comfortable with clichés. I should have been able to change that, but I couldn't. I had one student who wasn't in the class, who brought me a story. I remember tears came into my eyes because it was so good, because I hadn't seen a good piece of student writing in so long. She asked "How can I get into your class?" and I said. "Don't! Don't come near my class, just keep bringing me your work." And she has become a writer. The only one who did.

INTERVIEWER

Has there been a proliferation of creative-writing schools in Canada as in the United States?

MUNRO

Maybe not quite as much. We don't have anything up here like Iowa. But careers are made by teaching in writing departments. For a while I felt sorry for these people because they weren't getting published. The fact that they were making three times as much money as I would ever see didn't quite get through to me.

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INTERVIEWER

It seems the vast majority of your stories are based in Ontario. Would you choose to live here now, or was it circumstance?

MUNRO

Now that I've been here I would choose to. It was Gerry's mother's house, and he was living there to take care of her. And my father and my stepmother lived in the region too, we felt that there was a limited period of time when we would be at the service of these old people, and then we would move on. Then, of course, for various reasons, that didn't happen; they've been gone a long time, and we're still here. One of the reasons to stay now is that the landscape is so important to both of us. It's a great thing that we have in common. And thanks to Gerry I appreciate it in such a different way. I couldn't possess any other landscape or country or lake or town in this way. And I realize that now, so I'll never leave.

INTERVIEWER

How did you meet Gerry?

MUNRO

I had known Gerry when we were in university together. He was a senior, and I was a freshman. He was a returned World War II veteran, which meant that there were seven years between us. I had a terrific crush on him when I was eighteen, but he did not notice me at all. He was noticing other people. It was a small university so you sort of knew everybody and who they were. And he was one of that small group of people who seemed—I think we called them bohemian, when they still said bohemian; they wrote poetry for the literary magazine, and they were dangerous, got drunk and so on. I thought he was connected with the magazine, and, when I wrote my first story, part of my plan was that I would take this manuscript to him. Then we would fall into conversation, and he would fall in love with me, and every-

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thing would go on from there. I took the story to him, and he said, "John Cairns is the editor, he's down the hall." That was our only exchange.

INTERVIEWER

That was your only exchange all through your years in college?

MUNRO

Yes. But then, after I had published the story, he had left university. I was working as a waitress between my first and second years, I got a letter from Gerry. It was really a wonderful letter all about the story. It was my first fan letter. But it wasn't about me at all, and it didn't mention my beauty, or that it would be nice for us to get together or any of that. It was simply a literary appreciation. So that I appreciated it less than I might have if it had been from anybody else because I was hoping that it would be more. But it was a nice letter. Then, after I moved back to London and had the job at Western, he somehow heard me on the radio. I did an interview. I must have said where I was living and given the impression that I was not married anymore, because he then came to see me.

INTERVIEWER

And this was twenty-some odd years later?

MUNRO

Easily. More than twenty years later, and we hadn't seen each other in the meantime. He didn't look at all as I'd expected. He just called me up and said, "This is Gerry Fremlin. I'm in Clinton, and I was wondering if we could have lunch together sometime." I knew his home was in Clinton and I thought he had probably come home to see his parents. I think by this time I knew that he was working in Ottawa, I'd heard that from somebody. And I thought the wife and children were back in Ottawa, and he's home to visit his parents and he thought he'd like to have lunch with an old acquaintance.

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So this is what I expected until he turned up and I learned that he was living in Clinton and there was no wife and no children. We went to the faculty club and had three martinis each, at lunch. I think we were nervous. But we rapidly became very well acquainted. I think we were talking about living together by the end of the afternoon. It was very quick. I guess I finished out that term teaching at Western and then came up to Clinton, and we started living together there in the home where he had moved back to look after his mother.

INTERVIEWER

You hadn't made the decision to come back here for writing.

MUNRO

I never made a decision with any thought of my writing. And yet I never thought that I would abandon it. I guess because I didn't understand that you could have conditions for writing that would be any better than any other conditions. The only things that ever stopped me writing were the jobs—when I was defined publicly as a writer and given an office to work in.

INTERVIEWER

That seems reminiscent of your early story "The Office": the woman who rents an office in order to write and is so distracted by her landlord she eventually has to move out.

MUNRO

That was written because of a real experience. I did get an office, and I wasn't able to write anything there at all—except that story. The landlord did bug me all the time, but even when he stopped I couldn't work. This has happened anytime I've had a setup for writing, an office. When I worked as writer-in-residence at the University of Queensland in Australia, I had an office there, in the English Department, a really posh, nice office. Nobody had heard of me, so nobody came to see me. Nobody was trying to be a writer there anyway. It

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was like Florida; they went around in bikinis all the time. So I had all this time, and I was in this office, and I would just sit there thinking. I couldn't reach anything; I meant to, but it was paralyzing.

INTERVIEWER

Was Vancouver less useful for material?

MUNRO

I lived in the suburbs, first in North Vancouver, then in West Vancouver. In North Vancouver, the men all went away in the morning and came back at night, all day it was housewives and children. There was a lot of informal togetherness, and it was hard to be alone. There was a lot of competitive talk about vacuuming and washing the woolies, and I got quite frantic. When I had only one child I'd put her in the stroller and walk for miles to avoid the coffee parties. This was much more narrow and crushing than the culture I grew up in. So many things were forbidden—like taking anything seriously. Life was very tightly managed as a series of permitted recreations, permitted opinions and permitted ways of being a woman. The only outlet, I thought, was flirting with other people's husbands at parties; that was really the only time anything came up that you could feel was real, because the only contact you could have with men, that had any reality to it, seemed to me to be sexual. Otherwise, men usually didn't talk to you, or if they did they talked very much from high to low. I'd meet a university professor or someone, and if I knew something about what he knew, that would not be considered acceptable conversation. The men didn't like you to talk, and the women didn't like it either. So the world you had was female talk about the best kind of diet, or the best care of woolies. I was with the wives of the climbing men. I hated it so much I've never been able to write about it. Then, in West Vancouver, it was more of a mixed suburb, not all young couples, and I made great friends there. We talked about books and scandal and laughed at everything like high

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school girls. That's something I'd like to write about and haven't, that subversive society of young women, all keeping each other alive. But going to Victoria and opening a bookstore was the most wonderful thing that ever happened. It was great because all the crazy people in town came into the bookstore and talked to us.

INTERVIEWER

How did you get the idea to start the bookstore?

MUNRO

Jim wanted to leave Eatons, the big department store in town. We were talking about how he wanted to go into business of some kind, and I said. "Look, if we had a bookstore I could help." Everybody thought that we would go broke, and, of course, we almost did. We were very poor, but at that time my two older girls were both in school, so I could work all the time in the store, and I did. That was the happiest period in my first marriage.

INTERVIEWER

Did you always have the sense that the marriage wouldn't last?

MUNRO

I was like a Victorian daughter—the pressure to marry was so great, one felt it was something to get out of the way. "Well, I'll get that done, and they can't bug me about it, and then I'll be a real person and my life will begin." I think I married to be able to write, to settle down and give my attention back to the important thing. Sometimes now when I look back at those early years I think, "This was a hard-hearted young woman." I'm a far more conventional woman now than I was then.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't any young artist, on some level, have to be hard-hearted?

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MUNRO

It's worse if you're a woman. I want to keep ringing up my children and saying, "Are you sure you're all right? I didn't mean to be such a . . ." which of course would make them furious because it implies that they're some kind of damaged goods. Some part of me was absent for those children, and children detect things like that. Not that I neglected them, but I wasn't wholly absorbed. When my oldest daughter was about two, she'd come to where I was sitting at the typewriter, and I would bat her away with one hand and type with the other. I've told her that. This was bad because it made her the adversary to what was most important to me. I feel I've done everything backwards: this totally driven writer at the time when the kids were little and desperately needed me. And now, when they don't need me at all, I love them so much. I moon around the house and think, There used to be a lot more family dinners.

INTERVIEWER

You won the Governor-General's Award for your first book, which is roughly equivalent to the Pulitzer Prize in our country. It happens only very rarely in the States that a first book wins such a big prize. When it does, the writer's career often seems to suffer afterward.

MUNRO

Well, I wasn't young, for one thing. But it was difficult. I had about a year when I couldn't write anything because I was so busy thinking I had to get to work on a novel. I didn't have the burden of having produced a huge bestseller that everyone was talking about, as Amy Tan did with her first book, for instance. The book sold very badly, and nobody—even though it had won the Governor-General's Award—nobody had heard of it. You would go into bookstores and ask for it, and they didn't have it.

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INTERVIEWER

Do reviews matter much to you? Do you feel you've ever learned from them? Have you ever been hurt by them?

MUNRO

Yes and no, because really you can't learn much from reviews, you can nevertheless be very hurt. There's a feeling of public humiliation about a bad review. Even though it doesn't really matter to you, you would rather be clapped than booed offstage.

INTERVIEWER

Were you a big reader growing up? What work if any had an influence?

MUNRO

Reading was my life really until I was thirty. I was living in books. The writers of the American South were the first writers who really moved me because they showed me that you could write about small towns, rural people and that kind of life I knew very well. But the thing about the Southern writers that interested me, without my being really aware of it, was that all the Southern writers whom I really loved were women. I didn't really like Faulkner that much. I loved Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Ann Porter, Carson McCullers. There was a feeling that women could write about the freakish, the marginal.

INTERVIEWER

Which you've always done as well.

MUNRO

Yes. I came to feel that was our territory, whereas the mainstream big novel about real life was men's territory. I don't know how I got that feeling of being on the margins, it wasn't that I was *pushed* there. Maybe it was because I grew up on a margin. I knew there was something about the great writers

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I felt shut out from, but I didn't know quite what it was. I was terribly disturbed when I first read D. H. Lawrence. I was often disturbed by writers' views of female sexuality.

INTERVIEWER

Can you put your finger on what it was that disturbed you?

MUNRO

It was: how I can be a writer when I'm the object of other writers?

INTERVIEWER

What is your reaction to magic realism?

MUNRO

I did love *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I loved it, but it can't be imitated. It looks easy but it's not. It's wonderful when the ants carry off the baby, when the virgin rises into the sky, when the patriarch dies, and it rains flowers. But just as hard to pull off and just as wonderful is William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, where the dog is the character. He's dealing with a subject that potentially is so banal and makes it brilliant.

INTERVIEWER

Some of your newer stories seem to mark a change in direction.

MUNRO

About five years ago, when I was still working on the stories that were in *Friend of My Youth*, I wanted to do a story with alternate realities. I resisted this because I worried it would end up a Twilight Zone kind of stuff. You know, really junky stuff. I was scared of it. But I wrote "Carried Away," and I just kept fooling around with it and wrote that weird ending. Maybe it's something to do with age. Changing your perceptions of what is possible, of what has happened—not just what

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can happen but what really *has* happened. I have all these disconnected realities in my own life, and I see them in other people's lives. That was one of the problems—why I couldn't write novels, I never saw things hanging together any too well.

INTERVIEWER

What about your confidence. Has that changed over the years?

MUNRO

In writing, I've always had a lot of confidence, mixed with a dread that this confidence is entirely misplaced. I think in a way that my confidence came just from being dumb. Because I lived so out of any mainstream I didn't realize that women didn't become writers as readily as men, and that neither did people from a lower class. If you know you can write fairly well in a town where you've hardly met anyone else who reads, you obviously think this is a rare gift indeed.

INTERVIEWER

You've been a master at steering clear of the literary world. Has this been conscious or largely circumstantial?

MUNRO

It certainly was circumstantial for a long time, but then became a matter of choice. I think I'm a friendly person who is not very sociable. Mainly because of being a woman, a housewife and a mother, I want to keep a lot of time. It translates as being scared of it. I would have lost my confidence. I would have heard too much talk I didn't understand.

INTERVIEWER

So you were glad to be out of the mainstream?

MUNRO

This is maybe what I'm trying to say. I probably wouldn't have survived very well otherwise. It may have been that I

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would lose my confidence when I was with people who understood a lot more than I did about what they were doing. And talked a lot about it. And were confident in a way that would be acknowledged to have a more solid basis than mine. But then, it's very hard to tell about writers—who *is* confident?

INTERVIEWER

Was the community you grew up in pleased about your career?

MUNRO

It was known there had been stories published here and there, but my writing wasn't fancy. It didn't go over well in my hometown. The sex, the bad language, the incomprehensibility . . . The local newspaper printed an editorial about me "A soured introspective view of life . . ." and "A warped personality projected on . . ." My dad was already dead when they did that. They wouldn't do it while Dad was alive, because everyone really liked him. He was so liked and respected that everybody muted it a bit. But after he died, it was different.

INTERVIEWER

But he liked your work?

MUNRO

But he liked my work yes, and he was very proud of it. He read a lot, but he always felt a bit embarrassed about reading. And then he wrote a book just before he died which was published posthumously. It was a novel about pioneer families in the Southwest interior, set in a period just before his life, ending when he was a child. He had real gifts as a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Can you quote us a passage?

MUNRO

In one chapter he describes what the school was like for a boy who lived a little earlier than he did: "On other walls

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were some faded brown maps. Interesting places like Mongolia were shown, where scattered residents rode in sheepskin coats on small ponies. The center of Africa was a blank space marked only by crocodiles with mouths agape and lions who held dark people down with huge paws. In the very center Mr. Stanley was greeting Mr. Livingston, both wearing old hats."

INTERVIEWER

Did you recognize anything of your own life in his novel?

MUNRO

Not of my life, but I recognized a great deal of my style. The angle of vision, which didn't surprise me because I knew we had that in common.

INTERVIEWER

Had your mother read any of your work before she died?

MUNRO

My mother would not have liked it. I don't think so. The sex and the bad words. If she had been well, I would have had to have a big fight and break with the family in order to publish anything.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you would have done it?

MUNRO

I think so, yes, because as I said I was more hard-hearted then. The tenderness I feel now for my mother I didn't feel for a long time. I don't know how I would feel if one of my daughters wrote about me. They're about at the age now where they should be coming out with a first novel that is all about childhood. It must be a dreadful experience to go through, becoming a character in your kid's novel. People write carelessly wounding things in reviews like oh, that my father was a seedy fox farmer and things like this, reflecting on the pov-

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erty. A feminist writer interpreted "My Father," in *Lives of Girls and Women*, as straight autobiographical representation. She made me into someone who came out of this miserable background, because I had a "feckless father." This was an academic at a Canadian university, and I was so mad, I tried to find out how to sue her. I was furious. I didn't know what to do because I thought, it doesn't matter for me, I've had all this success, but all my father had was that he was my father. He's dead now. Is he going to be known as a feckless father because of what I did to him? Then I realized she represented a younger generation of people who had grown up on a totally different economic planet. They live in a welfare state to a certain extent: Medicare. They're not aware of the devastation something like illness could cause to a family. They've never gone through any kind of real financial trouble. They look at a family that's poor and they think this is some kind of choice. Not wanting to better yourself is fecklessness, it's stupidity or something. I grew up in a house that had no indoor toilet, and this to this generation is so appalling, truly squalid. Actually it wasn't squalid. It was fascinating.

INTERVIEWER

We didn't ask you questions about your writing day. How many days a week do you actually write?

MUNRO

I write every morning, seven days a week. I write starting about eight o'clock and finish up around eleven. Then I do other things the rest of the day, unless I do my final draft or something that I want to keep working on then I'll work all day with little breaks.

INTERVIEWER

Are you rigid about that schedule, even if there's a wedding or some other required event?

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MUNRO

I am so compulsive that I have a quota of pages. If I know that I am going somewhere on a certain day I will try to get those extra pages done ahead of time. That's so compulsive, it's awful. But I don't get too far behind, it's as if I could lose it somehow. This is something about aging. People get compulsive about things like this. I'm also compulsive now about how much I walk every day.

INTERVIEWER

How much do you walk?

MUNRO

Three miles every day, so if I know I'm going to miss a day, I have to make it up. I watched my father go through this same thing. You protect yourself by thinking if you have all these rituals and routines then nothing can get you.

INTERVIEWER

After you've spent five months or so completing a story, do you take time off?

MUNRO

I go pretty much right into the next one. I didn't use to when I had the children and more responsibilities, but these days I'm a little panicked at the idea of stopping—as if, if I stopped, I could be stopped for good. I have a backlog of ideas. But it isn't just ideas you need and it isn't just technique, or skill. There's a kind of excitement and faith that I can't work without. There was a time when I never lost that, when it was just inexhaustible. Now I have a little shift sometimes when I feel what it would be like to lose it, and I can't even describe what *it* is. I think it's being totally alive to what this story is. It doesn't even have an awful lot to do with whether the story will work or not. What happens in old age can be just a draining away of interest in some way that you don't foresee, because this happens with people who may have had

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a lot of interest and commitment to life. It's something about the living for the next meal. When you travel you see a lot of this in the faces of middle-aged people in restaurants, people my age—at the end of middle age and the beginning of old age. You see this, or you feel it like a snail, this sort of chuckling along looking at the sights. It's a feeling that the capacity for responding to things is being shut off in some way. I feel now that this is a possibility. I feel it like the possibility that you might get arthritis, so you exercise so you won't. Now I am more conscious of the possibility that everything could be lost, that you could lose what had filled your life before. Maybe keeping on, going through the motions, is actually what you have to do to keep this from happening. There are parts of a story where the story fails. That's not what I'm talking about. The story fails but your faith in the importance of doing the story doesn't fail. That it might is the danger. This may be the beast that's lurking in the closet in old age—the loss of the feeling that things are worth doing.

INTERVIEWER

One wonders though, because artists do seem to work to the very end.

MUNRO

I think it's possible that you do. You may have to be a little more vigilant. It's something I never would have been able to think of losing twenty years ago: the faith, the desire. I suppose it's like when you don't fall in love anymore. But you can put up with that because falling in love has not really been as necessary as something like this. I guess that's why I keep doing it. Yes, I don't stop for a day. It's like my walk every day. My body loses tone now in a week if I don't exercise. The vigilance has to be there all the time. Of course it wouldn't matter if you did give up writing. It's not the giving up of the writing that I fear. It's the giving up of this excitement or whatever it is that you feel that makes you write. This is what I wonder: what do most people do once the necessity

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of working all the time is removed? Even the retired people who take courses and have hobbies are looking for something to fill this void, and I feel such horror of being like that and having that kind of life. The only thing that I've ever had to fill my life has been writing. So I haven't learned how to live a life with a lot of diversity. The only other life I can imagine is a scholarly life which I probably idealize.

INTERVIEWER

They are very different lives too, the life of a single pursuit as opposed to the serial.

MUNRO

You go and play golf and you enjoy that, and then you garden, and then you have people in to dinner. But I sometimes think what if writing stops? What if it just peters out? Well, then I would have to start learning about something. You can't go from writing fiction to writing nonfiction, I don't think. Writing nonfiction is so hard on its own that it would be learning a whole new thing to do, but maybe I would try to do that. I've made a couple of attempts to plan a book, the sort of book everybody's writing about their family. But I haven't got any framework for it, any center.

INTERVIEWER

What about the essay, "Working for a Living," that appears in *The Grand Street Reader*? That reads like a memoir.

MUNRO

Yes. I'd like to do a book of essays and include it.

INTERVIEWER

Well, William Maxwell wrote about his family in that way in *Ancestors*.

MUNRO

I love that book, yes. I asked him about it. He had a lot of material to draw on. He did the thing you have to do,

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which is to latch the family history onto something larger that was happening at the time—in his case, the whole religious revival of the early 1800s, which I didn't know anything about. I didn't know that America had been practically a Godless country, and that suddenly all over the country people had started falling down in fits. That was wonderful. If you get something like that, then you've got the book. It would take a while. I keep thinking I'm going to do something like this, and then I get the idea for one more story, and that one more story always seems so infinitely more important, even though it's only a story, than the other work. I read that interview in *The New Yorker* with William Trevor, when he said something like: and then another little story comes along and that solves how life has got to be.

—**Jeanne McCulloch**
Mona Simpson

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Spaceships Have Landed

Alice Munro

Eunie Morgan's house was the third one past Monk's. It was the last house on the road. Around midnight, Eunie's mother said, she had heard the screen door close. She heard the screen door and thought nothing of it. She thought of course that Eunie had gone out to the toilet. Even in 1953 the Morgans had no indoor plumbing.

Of course none of them went as far as the toilet, late at night. Eunie and the old woman squatted on the grass. The old man watered the spirea at the far end of the porch.

Then I must have gone to sleep, Eunie's mother said, but I woke up later on, and I thought that I never heard her come in.

She went downstairs and walked around in the house. Eunie's room was behind the kitchen, but she might be sleeping anywhere on a hot night. She might be on the couch in the front room or stretched out on the hall floor to get the breeze between the doors. She might have gone out on the porch where there was a decent car seat that her father, years ago, had found discarded farther down the road. Her mother could

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not find her anywhere. The kitchen clock said twenty past two.

Eunie's mother went back upstairs and shook Eunie's father till he woke up.

"Eunie's not down there," she said.

"Where is she then?" said her husband, as if it was up to her to know. She had to shake him and shake him, to keep him from going back to sleep. He had a great indifference to news, a reluctance to listen to what anybody said, even when he was awake.

"Get up, get up," she said. "We got to find her." Finally he obeyed her, sat up, pulled on his trousers and his boots. "Get your flashlight," she told him, and with him behind her she went down the stairs again, out onto the porch, down into the yard. It was his job to shine the flashlight—she told him where. She directed him along the path to the toilet, which stood in a clump of lilacs and currant bushes at the back of the property. They poked the light inside the building and found nothing. Then they peered in among the sturdy lilac trunks—these were practically trees—and along the path—almost lost now—that led through a sagging section of the wire fence to the wild growth along the river bank. Nothing there. Nobody.

Back through the vegetable garden they went, lighting up the dusted potato plants and the rhubarb that was now grandly gone to seed. The old man lifted a great rhubarb leaf with his boot, and shone the light under that.

His wife asked whether he had gone crazy.

She recalled that Eunie used to walk in her sleep. But that was years ago.

She spotted something glinting at the corner of the house, like knives or a man in armour.

"There. There." she said. "Shine it there. What's that?"

It was only Eunie's bicycle, that she rode to work every day.

Then the mother called Eunie's name. She called it at the back and the front of the house; plum trees grew as high as the house in front and there was no sidewalk, just a dirt path

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between them. Their trunks crowded in like watchers, crooked black animals. When she waited for an answer she heard the gulp of a frog, close, as if it sat in those branches. Morgan's place was the last on this road, last of the houses with their backs to the river. Half a mile farther on, the road ended up in a field too marshy for any use, with weedy poplars growing up through the willow-bushes and elderberries. In the other direction, it met the road from town, then crossed the river and climbed the hill to the chicken farm. On the river flats lay the old fairgrounds, some grandstands abandoned since before the War, when the fair here was taken over by the big fair at Walley. The racetrack oval was still marked out in the grass.

This was where the town set out to be, over a hundred years ago. Mills and hostelries were here. But the river floods persuaded people to move to higher ground. House plots remained on the map, and roads laid out, but only the one row of houses where people lived who were too poor or in some way too stubborn to change—or, at the other extreme, too temporary in their living arrangements to object to the invasion of the water.

They gave up—Eunie's parents did. They sat down in the kitchen without any light on. It was between three and four o'clock. It must have seemed as if they were waiting for Eunie to come and tell them what to do. It was Eunie who was in charge in that house and they probably could hardly imagine a time when it had been otherwise. Nineteen years ago she had literally burst into their lives. Mrs. Morgan had thought she was having the change and getting stout—she was stout enough already that it did not make much difference. She thought the commotion in her stomach was what people called indigestion. She knew how people got children, she was not a dunce—it was just that she had gone on so long without any such thing happening. One day in the post office she had to ask for a chair, she was weak and overcome by cramps. Then her water broke, she was hustled over to the hospital,

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and Eunie popped out with a full head of white hair. She made her claim to attention from the moment of her birth.

One whole summer Eunie and Rhea played together. They never thought of their activity as play, but playing was what they called it, to satisfy other people. It was the most serious part of their lives. What they did the rest of the time seemed frivolous, forgettable. When they cut from Eunie's yard down to the riverbank they became different people. Each of them was called Tom. The Two Toms. A Tom was a noun to them, not just a name. It was not male or female. It meant somebody exceptionally brave and clever but not always lucky, and—just barely—indestructible. The Toms had a battle which could never end, and this was with the Bannershees. (Perhaps Rhea and Eunie had heard of banshees.) The Bannershees lurked along the river and could take the form of robbers or Germans or skeletons. Their tricks and propensities were endless. They laid traps and lay in ambush and tortured the children they had stolen. Sometimes Eunie and Rhea got some real children—the McKays who lived briefly in one of the river houses—and persuaded them to let themselves be tied up and thrashed with cattails. But the McKays could not or would not submit themselves to the plot, and they soon cried or escaped and went home, so that it was just the Toms again.

The Toms built a city of mud by the riverbank. It was walled with stones against the Bannershees' attack and contained a royal palace, a swimming pool, a flag. But then the Toms took a journey and the Bannershees leveled it all. (Of course Eunie and Rhea had to change themselves, often, into Bannershees.) A new leader appeared, a Bannershee queen; her name was Joylinda, and her schemes were diabolical. She had poisoned the blackberries growing on the bank, and the Toms had eaten some, being careless and hungry after their journey. They lay writhing and sweating down among the juicy weeds when the poison struck. They pressed their bellies into mud that was slightly soft and warm like just-made fudge. They felt their innards shrivel and they were shaking in every limb,

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but they had to get up and stagger about, looking for an antidote. They tried chewing sword grass—which true to its name could slice your skin—they smeared their mouths with mud, and considered biting into a live frog if they could catch one, but decided at last it was chokecherries that would save them from death. They ate a cluster of the tiny chokecherries and the skin inside their mouths puckered desperately, so that they had to run to the river to drink the water. They threw themselves down on it, where it was all silty among the water-lilies and you couldn't see the bottom. They drank and drank it, while the bluebottles flew straight as arrows over their heads. They were saved.

Emerging from this world in the late afternoon, they found themselves in Eunie's yard where her parents would be working still, or again, hoeing or hilling or weeding their vegetables. They would lie down in the shade of the house, exhausted as if they had swum lakes or climbed mountains. They smelled of the river, of the wild garlic and mint they had squashed underfoot, of the hot rank grass and the foul mud where the drain emptied. Sometimes Eunie would go into the house and get them something to eat—slices of bread with corn syrup or molasses. She never had to ask if she could do this. She always kept the bigger piece for herself.

They were not friends in the way that Rhea would understand being friends later on. They never tried to please or comfort each other. They did not share secrets, except for the game, and even that was not a secret because they let others take part. But they never let the others be Toms. So maybe that was what they shared, in their intense and daily collaboration. The nature, the danger, of being Toms.

Eunie never seemed subject to her parents or even connected to them in the way of other children. Rhea was struck by the way Eunie ruled her own life, the careless power she had in the house. When Rhea said that she had to be home at a certain time, or that she had to do chores or change her clothes, Eunie was affronted, disbelieving. Every decision Eunie made

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must have been on her own. When she was fifteen she stopped going to school and got a job in the glove factory. Rhea could imagine her coming home and announcing to her parents what she had done. No, not even announcing it—it would come out in an offhand way, maybe when she started getting home later in the afternoon. Now that she was earning money, she bought a bicycle. She bought a radio and listened to it in her room late at night. Perhaps her parents would hear shots ring out then, vehicles roaring through the streets. She might tell them things she had heard—the news of crimes and accidents, hurricanes, avalanches. Rhea didn't think they would pay much attention. They were busy and their life was eventful, though the events in it were seasonal and had to do with the vegetables which they sold in town to earn their living. The vegetables, the raspberries, the rhubarb. They hadn't time for much else.

While Eunie was still in school Rhea was riding her bicycle, so they never walked together although they took the same route. When Rhea rode past Eunie, Eunie was in the habit of shouting out something challenging, disparaging. Hi ho, Silver! And now, when Eunie had a bicycle, Rhea had started walking—there was a notion at the high school that any girl who rode a bicycle, after grade nine, looked gawky and ridiculous. Eunie would dismount and walk along beside Rhea, as if she was doing her a favor.

It was not a favor at all—Rhea did not want her. Eunie had always been a peculiar sight, tall for her age, with sharp, narrow shoulders, a whitish-blond crest of fuzzy hair sticking up at the crown of her head, a cocksure expression and a long, heavy jaw. That jaw gave a thickness to the lower part of her face that seemed reflected in the phlegmy growl of her voice. When she was younger none of that had mattered—her own conviction, that everything about her was proper had daunted many. But now she was five feet nine or ten, drab and mannish in her slacks and bandannas, with big feet in what looked like men's shoes, a hectoring voice and an ungainly walk—she had gone right from being a child to being a character. And she

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spoke to Rhea with a proprietary air that grated, asking her if she wasn't tired of going to school, or if her bike was broken and her father couldn't afford to get it fixed. When Rhea got a permanent, Eunie wanted to know what had happened to her hair. All this she thought she could do because she and Rhea lived on the same side of town and had played together, in an era that seemed to Rhea so distant and discardable. The worst thing was when Eunie launched into accounts that Rhea found both boring and infuriating, of murders and disasters and freakish events that she had heard about on the radio. Rhea was infuriated because she could not get Eunie to tell her whether these things had really happened, or even to make that distinction—as far as Rhea could tell—to herself.

Was that on the news, Eunie? Was it a story? Were there people acting it out in front of a microphone or was it reporting? Eunie! Was it real or was it a play?

It was Rhea, never Eunie, who would get frazzled by these questions. Eunie would just get on her bicycle and ride away.

"Toodeley oodeley oo! See you in the Zoo!"

Eunie's job suited her, surely. The glove factory occupied the second and third floors of a building on the main street, and in the warm weather when the windows were open you could hear not only the sewing machines but the loud jokes, the quarrels and insults, the famous rough language of the women who worked there. They were supposed to be of a lower class than waitresses, much lower than store clerks. They worked longer hours and made less money, but that didn't make them humble. Far from it. They came jostling and joking down the stairs and burst out on to the street. They yelled at cars, in which there were people they knew, and people they didn't know. They spread disorder as if they had every right.

People close to the bottom, like Eunie Morgan, or right at the top, like Billy Doud, showed a similar carelessness, a blunted understanding.

During her last year at high school, Rhea got a job, too. She worked in the shoe store on Saturday afternoons. Billy

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Doud came into the store, in early spring, and said he wanted to buy a pair of rubber boots, like the ones hanging up outside.

He took off his shoes and displayed his feet in fine black socks. Rhea told him that it would be better to wear woolen socks, work socks, inside rubber boots, so that his feet wouldn't slide around. He asked if they sold such socks and said he would buy a pair of those too, if Rhea would bring them. Then he asked her if she would put the wool socks on his feet.

That was all a ploy, he told her later. He didn't need either one, boots or socks.

His feet were long and white and perfectly sweet-smelling. A scent of lovely soap arose, a whiff of talcum. He leaned back in the chair, tall and pale, cool and clean—he himself might have been carved of soap. A high curved forehead, temples already bare, hair with a glint of tinsel, sleepy ivory eyelids. He was through college at last, he was twenty-four years old and home to learn the piano-factory business.

"That's sweet of you," he said, and asked her to go to a dance that night, the opening dance of the season in the Walley Pavilion.

After that they went to the dance in Walley every Saturday night. They didn't go out together during the week, because Billy had to get up early and go to the factory and learn the business—from his mother, known as the Tartar, and Rhea had to do some housekeeping for her father and brothers. Her mother was in the hospital, in Hamilton.

"There goes your heartthrob," girls would say, if Billy drove by the school when they were out playing volleyball, or passed on the street, and in truth Rhea's heart did throb—at the sight of him, his bright hatless hair, his negligent but surely powerful hands on the wheel. But also at the thought of herself suddenly singled out, so unexpectedly chosen, with the glow of a prizewinner—or a prize—about her now, a grace formerly hidden. Older women she didn't even know would smile at her on the street; girls wearing engagement rings spoke to her by name, and in the mornings she would wake up with the sense that she had been given a great present, but that her

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mind had boxed it away overnight, and she could not for a moment remember what it was.

Billy brought her honor everywhere but at home. That was not unexpected—home, as Rhea knew it, was where they cut you down to size. Her younger brothers would imitate Billy offering their father a cigarette. *Have a Pall Mall, Mr. Sellers.* They would flourish in front of him an imaginary package of ready-mades. The unctuous voice, the complacent gesture, made Billy Doud seem asinine. *Putty*, was what they called him, first *Silly Billy*, then *Silly Putty*, then *Putty* by itself.

"You quit tormenting your sister," Rhea's father said. Then he took it up himself, with a business-like question.

"You aim to keep on at the shoe store?"

Rhea said, "Why?"

"Oh. I was just thinking. You might need it."

"What for?"

"To support that fellow. Once his old lady's dead and he runs the business into the ground."

And all the time Billy Doud said how much he admired Rhea's father. Men like your father, he said. Who work so hard. Just to get along. And never expect any different. And are so decent, and even-tempered, and kindhearted. The world owes a lot to men like that.

They would leave the dance around midnight and drive in the two cars to the parking spot, at the end of a dirt road on the bluffs above Lake Huron. Billy kept the radio on, low. He always had the radio on, even though he might be telling Rhea some complicated story. His stories had to do with this life at college, with parties and practical jokes and dire escapades sometimes involving the police. They always had to do with drinking. Once somebody who was drunk vomited out a car window, and so noxious was the drink he had taken that the paint was destroyed all down the side of the car. The characters in these stories were not known to Rhea, except for Wayne. Girls' names cropped up occasionally, and then she might have to interrupt. She had seen Billy Doud home from college, over the years, with girls whose looks, or clothes, whose

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jaunty or fragile airs, she had been greatly taken with, and now she had to ask him, was Claire the one with the little hat that had a veil, and the purple gloves? In church? Which one had the long red hair and the camel's hair coat? Who wore velvet boots with mouton tops?

Usually Billy was not able to remember, and if he did go on to tell her more about these girls, what he had to say might not be complimentary.

When they parked, and sometimes even while they drove, Billy put an arm around Rhea's shoulders and squeezed her. A promise. There were promises also during their dances. He was not too proud to nuzzle her cheek then or drop a row of kisses on her hair. The kisses he gave her in the car were quicker, and the speed, the rhythm of them, the little smacks they might be served up with, informed her that they were jokes, or partly jokes. He tapped his fingers on her, on her knees and just at the top of her breasts, murmuring appreciatively and then scolding himself, or scolding Rhea, saying that he had to keep the lid on her.

"You're quite the baddy," he said. He pressed his lips tightly against hers as if it was his job to keep both their mouths shut.

"How you entice me," he said, in a voice not his own, the voice of some sleek and languishing movie actor, and slipped his hand between her legs, touched the skin above her stocking—then jumped and laughed, as if she was too hot there, or too cold.

"Wonder how old Wayne is getting on?" he said.

The rule was that after a time either he or Wayne would sound a blast on the car horn, and then the other one had to answer. This game—Rhea did not understand that it was a contest, or at any rate what kind of a contest it was—came eventually to take up more and more of his attention. "What do you think?" he would say, peering into the night at the dark shape of Wayne's car. "What do you think, should I give the boy the horn?"

On the drive back to Carstairs, to the bootlegger's, Rhea

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would feel like crying, for no reason, and her arms, her legs would feel heavy and useless. Left alone, she would probably have fallen fast asleep, but she couldn't stay alone because Lucille—Wayne's girl—was afraid of the dark, and when Billy and Wayne went into Monk's Rhea had to keep Lucille company.

Lucille was a thin, faired-haired girl with a finicky stomach, irregular periods and sensitive skin. The vagaries of her body fascinated her, and she treated it as if it was a balky valuable pet. She always carried baby oil in her purse and patted it onto her face which would have been savaged, a little while ago, by Wayne's bristles. The car smelled of baby oil and there was another smell under that, like bread dough.

"I'm going to make him shave once we get married," she said to Rhea. "Right before."

Billy Doud had told Rhea that Wayne had told him he had stuck to Lucille all this time, and was going to marry her, because she would make a good wife. He said that she wasn't the prettiest girl in the world, and she certainly wasn't the smartest, and for that reason he would always feel secure in the marriage. She wouldn't have a lot of bargaining power, he said. And she wasn't used to having a lot of money.

"Some people might say that was taking a cynical approach," Billy had said. "But others might say, realistic. A minister's son does have to be realistic, he's got to make his own way in life. Anyway, Wayne is Wayne."

"Wayne is Wayne," he had repeated with solemn pleasure.

"So how about you?" said Lucille. "Are you getting used to it?"

"Oh, yes," Rhea said.

"They say it's better without gloves on. I guess I'll find out once I'm married."

Rhea was too embarrassed to admit not having understood at once what they were talking about.

Lucille said that once she was married she would be using sponges and jelly. Rhea thought that sounded like a dessert,

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but she did not laugh, because she knew Lucille would take such a joke as an insult. Lucille began to talk about the conflict that was raging around her wedding, about whether the bridesmaids should wear picture hats or wreaths of rosebuds. Lucille had wanted rosebuds, and she thought it was all arranged, and then Wayne's sister had got a permanent that turned out badly. Now she wanted a hat to cover it up.

"She isn't a friend even, she's only in the wedding because of being his sister, and I couldn't leave her out. She's a selfish person."

Wayne's sister's selfishness had made Lucille break out in hives.

Something had changed in Rhea since she had turned out to be so lucky and had been smiled at, accepted by people like Lucille, shown what respect was owing to her by becoming Billy Doud's girl. It was a matter of getting *inside*, of being entirely and gratefully normal, of living within the life of the town. Rhea used to see the town of Carstairs from outside, as if it had a mysterious personality hidden from all the other people who lived inside it. For instance, one day in winter, looking by chance out the back window of the library in the town hall, she saw a team of horses pulling a load of grain sacks on the municipal weigh scales. Snow was falling. The horses were heavy workhorses, which were growing rare now, except that some farmers used them in winter, on the roads that were not ploughed. The big grain sacks, the heavy obedient animals, the snow, made Rhea think suddenly that the town was muffled in great distances, in snow-choked air, and that the life in it was a timeless ritual. And another day, a mildly overcast day in late fall, when she was walking home from school, heading out of town, she saw the dust blowing and it seemed to blow from over-worked, half-hopeless farms into stores where there were bolts of old dried cloth, and into dim rooms over the stores and into the barbershop with its stubborn thick-leaved nameless window plant, and the dentist's office with the little plush-lined drawers where he kept

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the false teeth. A place of waiting, of loneliness, unfinished gestures. These feelings or visions didn't come so much from what she could see before her as they did from books that she had got to read from that same library—Russian stories and *Winesburg, Ohio*. She might have been embarrassed by that fact, if she had thought about it. She was brought up to be embarrassed by any reliance on books, or any kind of stretching or blurring of the facts. She was brought up not to be a fool. So she was happy, now that she was turning out not to be that—she was happy to be waiting for her boyfriend Billy Doud outside the bootlegger's, with an engaged girl, Lucille, and to be talking about wedding hats. It was just that she felt cut off. She and Lucille had rolled down the car windows for air, and outside was the night with the river washing out of sight, at its lowest now, among the large white stones, and the frogs and crickets singing, the dirt roads faintly, faintly shining, on their way to nowhere, and the falling-down grandstand in the old fairgrounds sticking up like a crazy skeletal tower, in the dark. She was cut off from all of that. Blindfolded and cut off. Why?

Rhea was sitting in the bootlegger's house—Monk's—a bare, narrow wooden house soiled halfway up the walls by the periodic flooding of the river. Billy Doud was playing cards at one end of the big table. Rhea was seated in a rocking chair, over in a corner by the coal-oil stove, out of the way.

Ordinarily Rhea wouldn't have been inside this house at all. She would have been sitting outside with Lucille, in either Wayne's car or Billy's. Billy and Wayne would go in for one drink, promising to be out in half an hour. (This promise was not to be taken seriously.) But on this night—it was early in August—Lucille was at home sick, Billy and Rhea had gone to the dance in Walley by themselves and afterward they hadn't parked, they had driven directly across country to Monk's. Monk's was on the edge of Carstairs, where Billy and Rhea lived. Billy lived in town, Rhea lived on the chicken farm, just up over the bridge from this row of houses along the river.

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When Billy saw Wayne's car parked outside Monk's he greeted it as if it had been Wayne himself. "Ho-ho-ho! Wayne-the-boy!" he cried. "Beat us to it!" He gave Rhea's shoulder a squeeze. "In we go," he said. "You too."

Mrs. Monk opened the back door to them, and Billy said, "See—I brought a neighbor of yours." Mrs. Monk looked at Rhea as if Rhea had been a stone on the road. Billy Doud had odd ideas about people. He lumped them together, if they were poor—what he would call poor—or *working-class*. (Rhea knew that term only from books.) He lumped Rhea in with the Monks because she lived up the hill on the chicken farm—not understanding that her family didn't consider themselves neighbors to the people in these houses, or that her father would never in his life have sat down to drink there.

Rhea had met Mrs. Monk on the road to town, but Mrs. Monk never spoke. Her dark, graying hair was coiled up at the back of her head, and she didn't wear makeup. She had kept a slender figure, as not many women did in Carstairs. Her clothes were neat and plain, not particularly youthful but not what Rhea thought of as housewifely. She wore a checked skirt tonight and a short-sleeved yellow blouse. Her expression was always the same—not hostile, but grave and preoccupied, as if she had a familiar weight of griefs and worries.

She led Billy and Rhea into this room in the middle of the house. The men sitting at the table did not look up or take any notice of Billy until he pulled out a chair. There might have been some sort of rule about this. All ignored Rhea. Mrs. Monk lifted something out of the rocking chair and made a gesture for her to sit down.

"Get you a Coca-Cola?" she said.

The crinoline under Rhea's lime-green dance dress made a noise like crackling straw as she sat down. She laughed apologetically, but Mrs. Monk had already turned away. The only person who took any notice of the noise was Wayne, who was just coming into the room from the front hall. He raised his black eyebrows in a comradely but incriminating way. She never knew whether Wayne liked her or not. Even when he

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danced with her, at the Walley Pavilion (he and Billy did an obligatory, one-time-a-night, exchange of partners) he held her as if she was a package he was barely responsible for. He was a lifeless dancer.

He and Billy hadn't greeted each other as they usually did, with a growl and a punch in the air. They were cautious and reserved in front of these older men.

Besides Dint Mason and the man who sold pots and pans, Rhea knew Mr. Martin from the dry cleaners and Mr. Boles the undertaker. Some of the others had familiar faces and some didn't. None of these men would be exactly in disgrace for coming here—Monk's was not a disgraceful place. Yet it left a slight stain. It was mentioned as if it explained something. Even if a man flourished. *He goes to Monk's.*

Mrs. Monk brought Rhea a Coca-Cola without a glass. It was not cold.

What Mrs. Monk had removed from the chair, to let Rhea sit down, was a pile of clothes that had been dampened and rolled up for ironing. So, ironing went on here, ordinary housekeeping. Pie crust might be rolled out on that table. Meals were cooked—there was the woodstove, cold and spread with newspapers now, the coal-oil stove serving for summer. There was a smell of coal-oil and damp plaster. Flood stains on the wallpaper. Barren tidiness, dark green blinds pulled down to the window sills. A tin curtain in one corner, probably concealing an old dumbwaiter.

Mrs. Monk was to Rhea the most interesting person in the room. Her legs were bare, but she wore high heels. They were tapping all the time on the floorboards. Around the table, back and forth from the sideboard where the whiskey bottles were (and where she would pause, to write things down on a pad of paper—Rhea's Coca-Cola, the broken glass). Tap-tap-tap down the back hall to some supply base from which she returned with a clutch of beer bottles in each hand. She was watchful as a deaf-mute, and as silent, catching every signal around the table, responding obediently, unsmilingly, to every demand. This brought to Rhea's mind the rumors there

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were, about Mrs. Monk, and she thought of another sort of signal a man might make. Mrs. Monk would lay aside her apron, she would precede him out of the room into the front hall, where there must be a stairway, leading to the bedrooms. The other men, including her husband, would pretend not to notice. She would mount the stairs without looking back, letting the man follow with his eyes on her neat buttocks in her schoolteacher's skirt. Then on a waiting bed she arranges herself without the least hesitation or enthusiasm. This indifferent readiness, this cool accommodation, the notion of such a quick and driven and bought and paid-for encounter was to Rhea shamefully exciting.

To be so flattened and used and hardly to know who was doing it to you, to take it all in with that secret capability, over and over again.

She thought of Wayne coming out of the front hall just as she and Billy were being brought into the room. She thought, what if he was coming from up there? (Later, he told her that he had been using the phone—phoning Lucille, as he had promised. Later she came to believe those rumors were false.)

Wayne had raised his hand to her across the room, meaning, was she thirsty? He brought her another bottle of Coca-Cola and slid down to the floor beside her. "Sit down before I fall down," he said.

She understood from the first sip, or maybe from the first sniff, or even before that, that there was something else in her drink besides Coca-Cola. She thought that she would not drink all, or even half, of it. She would just take a little drink now and then, to show Wayne that he had not flummoxed her.

"Is that all right?" said Wayne, "Is that the kind of drink you like?"

"It's fine," Rhea said. "I like all kinds of drinks."

"All kinds? That's good. You sound like the right kind of girl for Billy Doud."

"Does he drink a lot?" Rhea said. "Billy?"

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"Put it this way," said Wayne. "Is the Pope Jewish? No. Wait. Was Jesus Catholic? No. Continue. I would not want to give you the wrong impression. Nor do I want to get clinical about this. Is Billy a drunk? Is he an alcoholic? Is he an assoholic? I mean as asshole-oholic? No, I got that wrong too. I forgot who I was talking to. Excuse please. Eliminate. Solly."

He said all this in two strange voices—one artificially high, sing-song, one gruff and serious. Rhea didn't think that she had ever heard him say so much before, in any kind of voice. It was Billy who talked, usually. Wayne said a word now and then, an unimportant word that seemed important because of the tone in which he said it. And yet this tone was often quite empty, quite neutral, the look on this face blank. That made people nervous. There was a sense of contempt being held in check. Rhea had seen Billy try to stretch a story, twist it, change its tone—all in order to get Waynes's grunt of approval, his absolving bark of laughter.

"You must not come to the conclusion that I don't like Billy," said Wayne. "No. No. I would never want you to think that."

"But you don't like him," Rhea said with satisfaction. "You don't at all." The satisfaction came from the fact that she was talking back to Wayne. She was looking him in the eye. No more than that. For he had made her nervous, too. He was one of those people who make far more of an impression than their size, or their looks, or anything about them, warrants. He was not very tall, and his compact body might have been pudgy in childhood—it might get pudgy again. He had a square face, rather pale except for the bluish shadow of the beard that wounded Lucille. His black hair was very straight and fine, and often flopped over his forehead.

"Don't I?" He said with surprise. "Do I not? How could that be? When Billy is such a lovely person? Look at him over there, drinking and playing cards with the common people. Don't you find him nice? Or do you ever think it's a little strange when anybody can be so nice all the time? *All the time*. There's only one time I've known him to slip up, and

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that's when you get him talking about some of his old girlfriends. Don't tell me you haven't noticed that."

He had his hand on the leg of Rhea's chair. He was rocking her.

She laughed, giddy from the rocking or perhaps because he had hit on the truth. According to Billy the girl with the veil and the purple gloves had a breath tainted by cigarette smoking, and another girl used vile language when she got drunk, and one of them had a skin infection, a *fungus*, under her arms. Billy had told Rhea all these things regretfully, but when he mentioned the fungus he broke into a giggle. Unwillingly, maliciously, he giggled.

"He does rake those poor girls over the coals." Wayne said. "The hairy legs. The hal-it-os-is. Doesn't it ever make you nervous? But then you're so nice and clean. I bet you shave your legs every night." He ran his hand down her leg, which by good luck she had shaved before going to the dance. "Or do you put that stuff on them, it melts the hair away? What is that stuff called?"

"Neet," Rhea said.

"Neet! That's the stuff. Only doesn't it have kind of a bad smell? A little moldy or like yeast or something? Yeast. Isn't that another thing girls get? Am I embarrassing you? I should be a gentleman and get you another drink. If I can stand and walk I'll get you another drink."

"This has not got hardly any whiskey in it," he said, of the next Coca-Cola he brought her. "This won't hurt you." She thought that the first statement was probably a lie, but the second was certainly true. Nothing could hurt her. And nothing was lost on her. She did not think that Wayne had any good intentions. Nevertheless, she was enjoying myself. All the bafflement, the fogged-in feeling she had, when she was with Billy, had burned away. She felt like laughing at everything that Wayne said, or that she herself said. She felt safe.

"This is a funny house," she said.

"How is it funny?" said Wayne. "Just how is this house funny? You're the one that's funny."

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Rhea looked down at this wagging black head and laughed, because he reminded her of some kind of dog. He was clever but there was a stubbornness about him that was close to stupidity. There was a dog's stubbornness and some misery too, about the way he kept bumping his head against her knee now, and jerking it back to shake the black hair out of his eyes.

She explained to him, with many interruptions during which she had to laugh at the possibility of explaining, that what was funny was the tin curtain in the corner of the room. She said that she thought there was a dumbwaiter behind it that went up and down from the cellar.

"We could curl up on the shelf," Wayne said. "Want to try it? We could get Billy to let down the rope."

She looked again for Billy's white shirt. So far as she knew he hadn't turned around to look at her once since he sat down. Wayne was sitting directly in front of her now, so that if Billy did turn around he wouldn't be able to see that her shoe was dangling from one toe and Wayne was flicking his fingers against the sole of her foot.

She said that she would have to go to the bathroom first.

"I will escort you," Wayne said.

He grabbed her legs to help himself up. Rhea said, "You're drunk."

"I'm not the only one."

The Monks' house had a toilet, in fact a bathroom, off the back hall. The bathtub was full of cases of beer—not cooling, just stored there. The toilet flushed properly. Rhea had been afraid it wouldn't, because it looked as if it hadn't, for the last person.

She looked at her face in the mirror over the sink and spoke to it with recklessness and approval. "Let him," she said. "*Let him*." She turned off the light and stepped into the dark hall. Hands took charge of her at once, and she was guided and propelled out the back door. Up against the wall of the house, she and Wayne were pushing and grabbing and kissing each other. She had the idea of herself, at this juncture, being

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opened and squeezed, opened and squeezed shut, like an accordion. She was getting a warning, too—something in the distance, not connected with what she and Wayne were doing. A troop of demons in the distance, trying to make themselves understood.

The Monks' dog had come up silently and was nosing in between them. Wayne knew its name.

"Get down, Rory! Get down, Rory!" he said as he yanked at Rhea's crinoline.

The warning was from her stomach, which was being shoved so tightly against the wall. The back door opened, Wayne said something clearly into her ear—she would never know which of these things happened first—and she was suddenly released and began to vomit. She had no intention of vomiting until she started. Then she went down on her hands and knees and vomited until her stomach felt wrung out like a poor rotten rag. When she finished she was shivering as if a fever had hit her, and her dance dress and crinoline were wet where the vomit had splattered.

Somebody else, not Wayne, pulled her up and wiped her face with the hem of the dress.

"Keep your mouth closed and breathe through your nose," Mrs. Monk said. "You get out of here," she said, either to Wayne or to Rory. She gave all of them their orders in the same voice, without sympathy and without blame. She pulled Rhea around the house to her husband's truck and half hoisted her into it.

Rhea said, "Billy."

"I'll tell your Billy. I'll say you got tired. Don't try to talk."

"I'm through throwing up," Rhea said.

"You never know," said Mrs. Monk, backing the truck out on to the road. She drove Rhea up the hill and into her own yard without saying anything more. When she had turned the truck around and stopped she said, "Watch out when you're stepping down. It's a bigger step than a car."

Rhea got herself into the house, used the bathroom without closing the door, kicked off her shoes in the kitchen, climbed

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the stairs, wadded up her dress and crinoline and pushed them far under the bed.

Rhea's father got up early, to gather the eggs and get ready to go to Hamilton, as he did every second Sunday. The boys were going with him—they could ride in the back of the truck. Rhea was not going, because there wouldn't be room in front. Her father was taking Mrs. Corey, whose husband was in the same hospital as Rhea's mother. When he took Mrs. Corey with him he always put on a shirt and a tie, because they might go into a restaurant on the way home.

He came and knocked on Rhea's door to tell her they were leaving.

"If you find time heavy you can clean the eggs on the table," he said.

He walked to the head of the stairs, then came back.

He called through her door. "Drink lots and lots of water."

Rhea wanted to scream at them all to get out of the house. She had things to consider, things inside her head that could not get free because of the pressure of the people in the house. That was what was causing her to have such a headache. After she had heard the truck's noise die away along the road she got out of bed carefully, downstairs, took three aspirins, drank as much water as she could hold, and measured coffee into the pot without looking down.

The eggs were on the table, in six-quart baskets. There were smears of hen-dirt and bits of straw stuck to them, waiting to be rubbed off with steel wool.

What things? Words, above all. The words that Wayne had said to her just as Mrs. Monk came out the back door.

I'd like to fuck you if you weren't so ugly.

She got dressed, and when the coffee was ready she poured a cup and went outside, out to the side porch which was in deep morning shade. The aspirins had started to work, and now instead of the headache she had a space in her head, a clear precarious space with a light buzz around it.

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She was not ugly. She knew she was not ugly.

How can you ever be sure, that you are not ugly?

But if she was ugly, would Billy Doud have gone out with her in the first place?

Billy Doud prided himself on being kind.

But Wayne was very drunk when he said that.

Drunkards speak truth.

It was a good thing she was not going to see her mother that day. If she ever wormed out of Rhea what was the matter—and Rhea could never be certain that she would not do that—then her mother would want Wayne chastised. She would be capable of phoning his father the minister. The word *fuck* was what would incense her, more than the word *ugly*. She would miss the point entirely.

Rhea's father's reaction would be more complicated. He would blame Billy, for taking her into a place like Monk's. Billy, Billy's sort of friends. He would be angry about the *fuck* part but really he would be ashamed of Rhea. He would be forever ashamed that a man had called her ugly.

You cannot let your parents anywhere near your real humiliations.

She knew she was not ugly.

How could she know she was not ugly?

She did not think about Billy and Wayne, or about what this might mean between them. She was not as yet very interested in other people.

She did think that when Wayne said those words he used his real voice.

She did not want to go back inside the house. She didn't want to have to look at the baskets full of dirty eggs. She started walking down the lane, wincing in the sunlight, lowering her head between one island of shade and the next. Each tree was different there and each was a milestone, when she used to ask her mother how far she could go to meet her father, coming home from town. As far as the hawthorn tree, as far as the beech tree, as far as the maple. He would stop and let Rhea ride on the running board.

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A car hooted from the road. Somebody who knew her, or just a man going by? She wanted to get out of sight, so she cut across the field that the chickens had picked clean and paved slick with their droppings. In one of the trees at the far side of this field her brothers had built a tree house. It was just a platform, with boards nailed to the tree trunk to climb. Rhea did that, she climbed up and sat on the platform. She saw that her brothers had cut windows in the leafy branches, for spying. She could look down on the road, and presently she saw a few cars bringing country children into town to the early Sunday school at the Baptist church. The people in the cars couldn't see here. Billy or Wayne wouldn't be able to see her, if by any chance they should come looking, with explanations or accusations or apologies.

In another direction, she could see flashes of the river and a part of the old fairgrounds. It was easy from there to make out where the racetrack used to go round, in the long grass.

She saw a person walking, following the racetrack. It was Eunie Morgan, and she was wearing her pajamas. She was walking along the racetrack, in light-colored, pale pink pajamas, at about half-past nine in the morning. She followed the track until it veered off, going down to where the riverbank path used to be. The bushes hid her.

Eunie Morgan with her white hair sticking up, her hair and her pajamas catching the light. Like an angel in feathers. But walking in her usual awkward, assertive way—body tilted forward, arms swinging free. Rhea didn't know what Eunie could be doing there. She didn't know anything about Eunie's disappearance. The sight of Eunie seemed both strange and natural to her.

She remembered how, on hot summer days, she used to think that Eunie's hair looked like a snowball or like threads of ice preserved from winter, and she would want to mash her face against it, to get cool.

She remembered the hot grass and garlic and the jumping-out-of-your-skin feeling, when they were turning into Toms.

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She went back to the house and phoned Wayne. She counted on his being home and the rest of his family in church.

"I want to ask you something and not on the phone," she said. "Dad and the boys went to Hamilton."

When Wayne got there she was on the porch, cleaning eggs.

"I want to know what you meant," she said.

"By what?" said Wayne.

Rhea looked up at him, and kept looking, with an egg in one hand and a piece of steel wool in the other.

"I was drunk," Wayne said. "You're not ugly."

Rhea said, "I know I'm not."

"I feel awful."

"Not for that," said Rhea.

"I was drunk. It was a joke."

Rhea said, "You don't want to get married to Lucille."

He leaned into the railing. She thought maybe he was going to be sick. But he got over that and tried his raising of the eyebrows, his discouraging smile.

"Oh, really? No kidding? So what advice do you have for me?"

"Write a note," said Rhea, just as if he had asked seriously. "Get in your car. Drive to Calgary."

"Just like that."

"If you want, I'll ride with you to Toronto. You can drop me there and I'll stay at the Y and get a job."

All this astonished Rhea, as it came out, almost as much as it did Wayne. But she couldn't go back on any of it.

"Did you ever look at a map?" Wayne said. "You don't go through Toronto on the way to Calgary. You go across at Sarnia and up through the States to Winnipeg. Then Calgary."

"Drop me off in Winnipeg then, that's better."

"One question. Have you had a sanity test recently?"

"No."

When Rhea saw her, Eunie was on her way home. It was a surprise to Eunie to find the riverbank path not clear as she was expecting it it be, but all grown up with brambles. When

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she pushed out into her own yard she had scratches and smears of blood on her arms and forehead, and bits of leaves caught in her hair. One side of her face was dirty, too, from resting on the ground.

In the kitchen Eunie found her mother and her father and her Aunt Muriel Martin, and Norman Slater, the Chief of Police, and Billy Doud. After her mother had phoned her Aunt Muriel, her father had stirred himself, and said that he was going to phone Mr. Doud. He had worked in Doud's when he was young, and remembered how Mr. Doud, Billy's father, was always sent for in an emergency.

"You mean the one that's dead," said Eunie's mother. "What if you get *her*?" But he phoned anyway, and got Billy, who hadn't been to bed.

Aunt Muriel Martin had phoned the Chief of Police. He said he would be down as soon as he got dressed and ate his breakfast. This took him some time. He disliked anything puzzling or disruptive, anything that might force him to make decisions which could be criticized later or result in his looking like a fool. Of all the people in the kitchen, he might have been the happiest to see Eunie home safe, and to hear her story. It was right out of his jurisdiction. There was nothing to be followed up, nobody to be charged.

Eunie said that three children had come up to her, in her own yard, in the middle of the night. They said that they had something to show her. "What's that?" she said. She asked them what they were doing up so late at night. She didn't recall what they answered.

She found herself being borne along by them, without ever having said that she would go. They took her out through the gap in the fence at the corner of the yard and along the path by the riverbank. She was surprised to find the path so well opened up—she had the idea that it must be all overgrown, now that she didn't go that way anymore.

It was two boys and a girl who took her. They looked about nine or ten or eleven years old, and they all wore the same sort of outfit—a kind of seersucker sunsuit with a bib in front

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and straps over the shoulders. So fresh and clean, as if just off the ironing board. The hair of these children was straight, light brown and shiny. How could she tell at night what color their hair was and that their sunsuits were made of seersucker? When she came out of the house she hadn't brought the flashlight. They must have brought some kind of light with them—that was her impression.

They took her along the path and out onto the old fairgrounds. They took her to their tent. But it seemed to her that she didn't see that tent once from the outside. She was just suddenly inside it, and she saw that it was white, very high, and shivering like the sails on a boat; also it was lit up, and again she had no idea where the light was coming from. And a certain part of this tent, or building or whatever it was, seemed to be made of glass. Yes. Green glass, a very light green, as if panels of it were slid in between the sails. Possibly to a glass floor, because she was walking in her bare feet on something cool and smooth—not grass at all, and certainly not gravel.

(Later on, in the newspaper, there was a drawing, an artist's conception, of something like a sailboat in a saucer. But flying saucer was not what Eunie called it—she called it a tent, at least when she was talking about it immediately afterwards. Also she said nothing about what appeared in print later, in a book of such stories, concerning the capture and investigation of her body, the sampling of her blood and fluids, the possibility that one of her secret eggs had been spirited away, that fertilization might have taken place in an alien dimension—subtle or explosive, at any rate indescribable, mating, that sucked Eunie's genes into the lifestream of the invaders.)

She was set down in a seat she hadn't noticed, she couldn't say if it was a plain chair or a throne, and these children began to weave a veil around her. It was like mosquito netting or some such stuff, light but strong. All three of them moved continuously winding or weaving it around her, never bumping into each other. She did not ask one question. All possible questions, such as, "What do you think you're doing?" or

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"How did you get here?" or "Where are the grown-ups?" had just slipped off some place where she couldn't reach them. It was not that she was scared. She was opposite of scared, or uncomfortable. It was so pleasant, she couldn't describe it. (When she tried to, she said, "I was just as happy as a cow in clover.") And also everything had got to seem perfectly normal. You wouldn't ask questions, anymore than you would ask, "What is that teapot doing here?" when you were sitting in an ordinary room.

When she woke up there was nothing around her, nothing over her. She was lying in the hot sunlight, well on in the morning. In the fairgrounds, on the hard earth.

"Wonderful," said Billy Doud several times as he watched and listened to Eunie. He smelled of beer but seemed sober and very attentive. More than attentive—you might say, enchanted. Eunie's singular revelations, her dirty flushed face and her thickened, somewhat arrogant voice, appeared to wrap Billy Doud in delight. *Wonderful.*

His love—Billy Doud's kind of love—sprang up to meet a need that Eunie wouldn't know anything about.

Aunt Muriel said it was time to phone the newspapers.

Eunie's mother said, "Won't Bill Proctor be in church?" She was speaking of the editor of the Carstairs *Argus*.

"Bill Proctor can cool his heels," Aunt Muriel said. "I'm phoning *The London Free Press*!"

She did that, but she did not get to talk to the right person, only to some sort of caretaker, because of its being Sunday. "They'll be sorry!" she said. "I'm going to go over their heads right to *The Toronto Star*!"

She had taken charge of the story. Eunie let her. Eunie was satisfied. When she was not speaking, and when it seemed nobody was looking at her, she sat still, with a look of satisfaction and indifference on her face. She did not ask that anybody take charge of *her*, try to protect her, with seriousness and kindness, through what lay ahead. But Billy Doud had already made a vow to do that.

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Eunie had some fame, for a while. Reporters came. A book writer came. A photographer took pictures of the fairgrounds, and of the racetrack, which was supposed to be the mark left by the spaceship. There was also a picture of the grandstand, and a caption that said it had been knocked down in the course of the landing.

Interest in this sort of story reached a peak years ago, then slowly dwindled.

"Who knows what happened," Rhea's father said, in a letter that he wrote to Calgary.

"One sure thing is, Eunie Morgan never made a cent out of it."

He was writing this letter to Rhea. Soon after they got to Calgary, Wayne and Rhea were married. You had to be married then, to get an apartment together—at least in Calgary—and they had discovered that they did not want to live separately. That would continue to be the way they felt most of the time, though they would discuss it—living separately—and threaten it, and give it a couple of brief tries.

Wayne left the paper and went into television. For years you might see him on the late news, sometimes in rain or snow on Parliament Hill, delivering some rumor or piece of information. Later he traveled to foreign cities and did the same thing there, and still later he got to be one of the people who sit indoors and discuss what the news means and who is telling lies.

(Eunie became very fond of television but she never saw Wayne, because she hated it when people just talked—she always switched at once to something happening.)

Back in Carstairs on a brief visit, and wandering in the cemetery, looking to see who has moved in since her last inspection, Rhea spots Lucille Flagg's name on a stone. But it is all right—Lucille isn't dead. Her husband is, and Lucille has had her own name and date of birth cut on the stone along with his, ahead of time. A lot of people do this, because the cost of stonecutting is always going up.

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Rhea remembers the hats and rosebuds, and feels a tenderness for Lucille that cannot ever be returned.

At this time Rhea and Wayne have lived together for far more than half their lives. They have had three children, and between them, counting everything, five times as many lovers. And now abruptly, surprisingly, all this turbulence and fruitfulness and uncertain but lively expectation has receded and she knows they are beginning to be old. There in the cemetery she says out loud, "I can't get used to it."

They look up the Douds, who are friends of theirs in a way, and together the two couples drive out to where the old fairgrounds used to be.

Rhea says the same thing there.

The river houses all gone. The Morgans' house, the Monks' house—everything gone of that first mistaken settlement. The land is now a floodplain, under the control of the Peregrine River Authority. Nothing can be built there anymore. A spacious parkland, a shorn and civilized riverbank—nothing left but a few of the same old trees standing around, their leaves still green but weighed down by a diffuse golden moisture that is in the air on this September afternoon not many years before the end of the century.

"I can't get used to it," says Rhea.

They are white-haired now, all four of them. Rhea is a thin and darting sort of woman, whose lively and cajoling ways have come in handy teaching English as a second language. Wayne is thin, too, with a fine white beard and a mild manner. When he's not appearing on television he might remind you of a Tibetan monk. In front of the camera he turns caustic, even brutal.

The Douds are big people, stately and fresh-faced, with a cushioning of wholesome fat.

Billy Doud smiles at Rhea's vehemence, and looks around with distracted approval.

"Time marches on," he says.

He pats his wife on her broad back, responding to a low grumble that the others haven't heard. He tells her they'll be

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going home in a minute, she won't miss the show she watches every afternoon.

Rhea's father was right about Eunie not making any money out of her experiences, and he was right too in what he had predicted about Billy Doud. After Billy's mother died, problems multiplied and Billy sold out. Soon the people who had bought the factory from him sold out in their turn and the plant was closed down. There were no more pianos made in Carstairs. Billy went to Toronto and got a job, which Rhea's father said had something to do with schizophrenics or drug addicts or Christianity.

In fact, Billy was working at halfway houses and group homes, and Wayne and Rhea knew this. Billy had kept up the friendship. He had also kept up his special friendship with Eunie. He hired her to look after his sister Bea when Bea began drinking a little too much to look after herself. (Billy was not drinking at all anymore.)

When Bea died, Billy inherited the house and made it over into a home for old people and disabled people who were not so old or disabled that they needed to be in bed. He meant to make it a place where they could get comfort and kindness and little treats and entertainments. He came back to Carstairs and settled in to run it.

He asked Eunie Morgan to marry him.

"I wouldn't want for there to be anything going on, or anything," Eunie said.

"Oh, my dear!" said Billy. "Oh, my dear, dear Eunie!"

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Kay Ryan

Matrigupta

of Ujjain, India, wrote a poem that so pleased Rajah Vicrama Ditya HE WAS GIVEN THE ENTIRE STATE OF KASHMIR. *The poet ruled Kashmir for five years (118–123)* AND THEN ABDICATED TO BECOME A RECLUSE.

—Ripley's Believe It or Not!

(What a Trojan horse)
thought Matrigupta,
rewarded for his verse
by Rajah Ditya
with one of the nicest
states in India.
(Why couldn't it
have been a gold watch
or an inscribed plate?
I'll never write again
at this rate.)

"I am too blessed,"
went the little thank-you
poem he had rehearsed,
but already his words
were getting reversed
and he said, "I am
blue tressed," which was
only the first indication
of how things were in Kashmir
for the five years
before his abdication.

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Marilyn Hacker

Cancer Winter

for Rafael Campo and Hayden Carruth

I

Syllables shaped around the darkening day's
contours. Next to armchairs, on desks, lamps
were switched on. Tires hissed softly on the damp
tar. In my room, a flute concerto played.
Slate roofs glistened in the rain's thin glaze.
I peered out from a cave like a warm bear.
Hall lights flicked on as someone climbed the stairs
across the street, blinked out: a key, a phrase
turned in a lock, and something flew open.
I watched a young man at his window write
at a plank table, one pooled halogen
light on his book, dim shelves behind him, night
falling fraternal on the flux between
the odd and even numbers of the street.

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II

I woke up, and the surgeon said, "You're cured."
Strapped to the gurney, in the cotton gown
and pants I was wearing when they slid me down
onto the table, made new straps secure
while I stared at the hydra-headed OR
lamp, I took in the tall, confident, brown-
skinned man, and the ache I couldn't quite call pain
from where my right breast wasn't anymore
to my armpit. A not-yet-talking head,
I bit dry lips. What else could he have said?
And then my love was there in a hospital coat;
then my old love, still young and very scared.
Then I, alone, graphed clock-hands' asymptote
to noon, when I would be wheeled back upstairs.

III

The odd and even numbers of the street
I live on are four thousand miles away
from an Ohio February day
snow-blanketed, roads iced over, with sleet
expected later, where I'm incomplete
as my abbreviated chest. I weigh
less—one breast less—since the Paris gray
December evening, when a neighbor's feet
coming up ancient stairs, the feet I counted
on paper were the company I craved.
My calm right breast seethed with a grasping tumor.
The certainty of my returns amounted
to nothing. After terror, being brave
became another form of gallows humor.

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IV

At noon, an orderly wheeled me upstairs
via an elevator hung with Season's
Greetings streamers, bright and false as treason.
The single room the surgeon let us share
the night before the knife was scrubbed and bare
except for blush-pink roses in a vase on
the dresser. Veering through a morphine haze on
the cranked bed, I was avidly aware
of my own breathing, my thirst, that it was over—
the week that ended on this New Year's Eve.
A known hand held, while I sipped, icewater,
afloat between ache, sleep, lover and lover.
The one who stayed would stay; the one would leave.
The hand that held the cup next was my daughter's.

V

It's become a form of gallows humor
to reread the elegies I wrote
at that pine table, with their undernote
of cancer as death's leitmotiv, enumer-
ating my dead, the unknown dead, the rumor
of random and pandemic deaths. I thought
I was a witness, a survivor, caught
in a maelstrom and brought forth, who knew more
of pain than some, but learned it loving others.
I need to find another metaphor
while I eat up stories of people's mothers
who had mastectomies. "She's eighty-four
this year, and *fine*!" Cell-shocked, I brace to do
what I can, an unimportant exiled Jew.

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VI

The hand that held the cup next was my daughter's
—who would be holding shirts for me to wear,
sleeve out, for my bum arm. She'd wash my hair
(not falling yet), strew teenager's disorder
in the kitchen, help me out of the bathwater.
A dozen times, she looked at the long scar
studded with staples, where I'd suckled her,
and didn't turn. She took me/I brought her
to the surgeon's office, where she'd hold
my hand, while his sure hand, with its neat tool, snipped
the steel, as on a revised manuscript
radically rewritten since my star
turn nursing her without a "nursing bra"
from small, firm breasts, a twenty-five-year-old's.

VII

I'm still alive, an unimportant Jew
who lives in exile, voluntarily
or not: *Ohio's alien to me.*
Death follows me home here, but I pay dues
to stay alive. White cell count under two:
a week's delay in chemotherapy
stretches it out: Ohio till July?
The Nazarenes and Pentecostals who
think drinking wine's a mortal sin would pray
for me to heal, find Jesus, go straight, leave.
But I'm alive, and can believe I'll stay
alive a while. Insomniac with terror,
I tell myself, it isn't the worst horror.
It's not Auschwitz. It's not the Vel d'Hiv.

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VIII

I had "breasts like a twenty-five-year-old,"
and that was why, although a mammogram
was done the day of my year-end exam
in which the doctor found the lump, it told
her nothing: small, firm, dense breasts have and hold
their dirty secrets till their secrets damn
them. Out of the operating room
the tumor was delivered, sectioned, cold-
packed, pickled, to demonstrate to residents
an infiltrative ductal carcinoma
(with others of its kind). I've one small, dense
firm breast left, and cell-killer pills so no more
killer cells grow, no eggs drop. To survive
my body stops dreaming it's twenty-five.

IX

It's not Auschwitz. It's not the Vel d'Hiv.
It's not gang-rape in Bosnia or
gang-rape and gutting in El Salvador.
My self-betraying body needs to grieve
at how hatreds metastasize. Reprieved
(if I am), what am I living for?
Cancer, gratuitous as a massacre,
answers to nothing, tempts me to retrieve
the white-eyed panic in the mortal night,
my father's silent death at forty-eight,
each numbered, shaved, emaciated Jew
I might have been. They wore the blunt tattoo,
a scar, if they survived, oceans away.
Should I tattoo my scar? What would it say?

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X

No body stops dreaming it's twenty-five,
or twelve, or ten, when what is possible's
a long road poplars curtain against loss, able
to swim the river, hike the culvert, drive
through the open portal, find the gold hive
dripping with liquid sweetness. Risible
fantasy, if, all the while, invisible
entropies block the roads, so you arrive
outside a ruin, where trees bald with blight
wane by a river drained to sluggish mud.
The setting sun looks terribly like blood.
The hovering swarm has nothing to forgive.
Your voice petitions the indifferent night:
"I don't know how to die yet. Let me live."

XI

Should I tattoo my scar? What would it say?
It could say "K.J.'s Truck Stop" in plain Eng-
lish, highlighted with a nipple ring
(the French version: Chez KJ/Les Routiers).
I won't be wearing falsies, and one day
I'll bake my chest again at Juan-les-Pins,
round side and flat, gynandre/androgyne,
close by my love's warm flanks (though she's sun-shy
as I should be: it's a carcinogen
like smoked fish, caffeine, butterfat and wine).
O let me have my life and live it too!
She kissed my breasts, and now one breast she kissed
is dead meat, with its pickled blight on view.
She'll kiss the scar, and then the living breast.

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XII

I don't know how to die yet. Let me live!
Did Etty Hillesum think that, or Anne Frank,
or the forty-year-old schoolteacher the bank
robber took hostage when the cop guns swiv-
eled on them both, or the seropositive
nurse's aide, who, one long-gone payday, drank
too much, fucked whom? or the bag lady who stank
more than I wished as I came closer to give
my meager change? I say it, bargaining
with the *contras* in my blood, immune
system bombarded but on guard. Who's gone?
The bookseller who died at thirty-nine,
poet, at fifty-eight, friend, fifty-one,
friend, fifty-five. These numbers do not sing.

XIII

She'll kiss the scar, and then the living breast,
and then, again, from ribs to pit, the scar,
but only after I've flown back to her
out of the unforgiving middle west
where my life's strange, and flat disinterest
greets strangers. At Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer,
lust pulsed between us, pulsed in the plum-grove where
figs dropped to us like manna to the blessed.
O blight that ate my breast like worms in fruit,
be banished by the daily pesticide
that I ingest. Let me live to praise
her breathing body in my arms, our wide-
branched perennial love, from whose taproot
syllables shape around the lengthening days.

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XIV

Friends, you died young. These numbers do not sing
your requiems, your elegies, our war
cry: at last, not "Why me?" but "No more
one-in-nine, one-in-three, rogue cells killing
women". You're my companions, travelling
from work to home to the home I left for
work, and the plague, and the poison which might cure.
The late sunlight, the morning rain, will bring
me back to where I started, whole, alone,
with fragrant coffee into which I've poured
steamed milk, book open on the scarred pine table.
I almost forget how close to the bone
my chest's right side is. Unremarkable,
I woke up, still alive. Does that mean "cured"?

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Clayton Eshleman

Homuncula

I AM MY FATHER'S ONLY UNBORN DAUGHTER.
I gave birth to my mother and am responsible for her death.

Someone who believes that at least one part of her
is immortal is loose in this room,
some hag who has set her peat on fire,
who, as if they are cosmetics,
is doodling with the fumes.

•

WHOSE FEATHERS DO
not glisten as her wings

shake with pain?
Whose bird is not hit?

Whose head is not hidden
under her absent lover's body

in the box she has been
placed in, her office,

the head in which she
waits for someone to heal her?

Whose ankle is not
banded with a name?

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•

I LIVE IN THE SKY
off the hero's palm.

At times, his crusts
are feasts which camouflage

his size as mine,
he seems to be within my grasp,

a glass surfboard
between myself and the roar . . .

he is. Intransitive.
Kaleidoscope of nays.

•

TO FEEL THE EARTH'S CURVE
under palm,
neither flat
though flatness is felt
as the mean
between the inverted bowl
I make of earth and
my palm's arch.

To touch, then,
is to feel hollow,
to imagine a womb
insinuation in the gossip
between plates, like us,
laminating their lamentations.

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•

COMPRESSED CHARWOMAN—I said to a fire hydrant—
phial embedded with Aladdin,
4-spigoted glimpse of kneeling woman,
Isis searching for her lost sponges,

genius of contraction, foetus
awaiting a fix, most shot through
addict, arm thrust in lysol,
patriarchal inhaler, rib

bent into a knee, tappable,
uncontactable, waiting to serve,
O squat riveted dependability
in deathrow to an alarm.

•

UNDER DEATH
as if in nickel

the actual
ledge of the sickle.

Scythe,
you are my seed.

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Jane Cooper

Seventeen Questions about *King Kong*

The most amazing thing I know about Jane Cooper is that she's the niece of King Kong.
—James Wright

Is it a myth? And if so, what does it tell us about ourselves?

Is Kong a giant ape, or is he an African, beating his chest like a responsive gong?

Fay Wray lies in the hand of Kong as in the hand of God the Destroyer. She gives the famous scream. Is the final conflict (as Merian C. Cooper maintained) really between man and the forces of nature, or is it a struggle for the soul and body of the white woman?

Who was more afraid of the dark, Uncle Merian or his older sister? She was always ready to venture downstairs whenever he heard a burgler.

When he was six his Confederate uncle gave him *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* by Paul du Chaillu, 1861. Does that island of prehistoric life-forms still rise somewhere off the coast of the Dark Continent, or is it lost in preconscious memory?

Is fear of the dark the same as fear of sexuality? Mary Coldwell his mother would have destroyed herself had she not been bound by a thread to the wrist of her wakeful nurse. What nights theirs must have been!

Why was I too first called after Mary (or Merian) Coldwell, till my mother decided it was a hard-luck name?

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How does our rising terror at so much violence, as Kong drops the sailors one by one into the void or rips them with his fangs, resolve itself into shame at Kong's betrayal?

Is Kong's violence finally justified, because he was in chains?

Is King Kong our Christ?

Watch him overturn the el-train, rampage through the streets! But why is New York, the technological marvel, so distrusted, when technologically the film was unsurpassed for its time?

Must the anthropologist always dream animal dreams? Must we?

Kong clings to the thread of the Empire State Building. He wavers. Why did Uncle Merian and his partner Schoedsack choose to play the airmen who over and over laugh to shoot Kong down?

He said: *Why did I ever leave Africa*? — and then as if someone had just passed a washcloth over his face: *But I've had a very good marriage*.

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How to Travel with a Salmon

Umberto Eco

According to the newspapers, there are two chief problems that beset the modern world: the invasion of the computer, and the alarming extension of the Third World. The newspapers are right, and I know it.

My recent journey was brief: one day in Stockholm and three in London. In Stockholm, taking advantage of a free hour, I bought a smoked salmon, an enormous one, dirt cheap. It was carefully packaged in plastic, but I was told that, if I was traveling, I would be well-advised to keep it refrigerated. Just try.

Happily, in London, my publisher made me a reservation in a deluxe hotel, a room provided with minibar. But on arriving at the hotel, I have the impression of entering a foreign legation in Peking during the Boxer rebellion.

Whole families are camping out in the lobby; travelers wrapped in blankets are sleeping amid their luggage. I question the staff, all of them Indians, except for a few Malayans, and I am told that just yesterday, in this grand hotel, a compu-

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terized system was installed and, before all the kinks could be eliminated, it broke down for two hours. There was no way of telling which rooms were occupied or which were free. I would have to wait.

Towards evening the computer was debugged, and I managed to get into my room. Worried about my salmon, I removed it from the suitcase and looked for the minibar.

As a rule, in normal hotels, the minibar is a small refrigerator containing two beers, some miniature bottles of hard liquor, a few tins of fruit juice and two packets of peanuts. In my hotel, the refrigerator was family size and contained fifty bottles of whisky, gin, Drambuie, Courvoisier, eight large Perriers, two Vitelloises and two Evians, three half-bottles of champagne, various cans of Guinness, Pale Ale, Dutch beer, German beer, bottles of white wine both French and Italian and, besides peanuts, also cocktail crackers, almonds, chocolates and Alka-Seltzer. There was no room for the salmon. I pulled out two roomy drawers of the dresser and emptied the contents of the bar into them, then refrigerated the salmon, and thought no more about it. The next day, when I came back into the room at four in the afternoon, the salmon was on the desk, and the bar was again crammed almost solid with gourmet products. I opened the drawers, only to discover that everything I had hidden there the day before was still in place. I called the desk and told them to inform the chambermaids that if they found the bar empty it wasn't because I had consumed all its contents, but because of the salmon. They replied that the information had to be given to the central computer, but because most of the staff spoke no English, verbal instructions were not accepted. All orders had to be given in BASIC.

I pulled out another two drawers and transferred the new contents of the bar, where I then replaced my salmon. The next day at four P.M., the salmon was back on the desk, and it was already emanating a suspect odor.

The bar was crammed with bottles large and small, and the four drawers of the dresser suggested the back room of a speakeasy at the height of Prohibition. I called the desk again

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and they told me they were having more trouble with the computer. I rang the bell for room service and tried to explain my situation to a youth with his hair in a bun; he spoke only a dialect that, as an anthropologist colleague explained later, was heard only in Kefiristan at about the time Alexander the Great was wooing Roxana.

The next morning I went down to sign the bill. It was astronomical. It indicated that in two and a half days I had consumed several hectoliters of Veuve Clicquot, ten liters of various whiskies, including some very rare single malts, eight liters of gin, twenty-five liters of mineral water (both Perrier and Evian, plus some bottles of San Pellegrino), enough fruit juice to protect from scurvy all the children in UNICEF's care, enough almonds, walnuts and peanuts to induce vomiting in the attendant on the autopsy of the characters in *La grande bouffe*. I tried to explain, but the clerk, with a betel-blackened smile, assured me that this was what the computer said. I asked for a lawyer, and they brought me an avocado.

Now my publisher is furious and thinks I'm a chronic free-loader. The salmon is inedible. My children insist I cut down on my drinking.

—translated From the Italian by William Weaver

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Rebecca T. Godwin works in the communications office at Bennington College. Her stories have appeared in *South Carolina Review* and other magazines. She is a 1993–1994 NEA fellow. Her second novel, *Keeper of the House*, from which the story in this issue is adapted, will be published by St. Martin's Press this fall.

Rick Moody's first novel, *Garden State*, was the winner of the 1991 Editor's Choice Award from the Pushcart Press. His short fiction and essays have been published in *Grand Street*, *The Quarterly* and *The Antioch Review*. His most recent novel, *The Ice Storm*, was published this spring by Little Brown. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Alice Munro is the subject of a Writers-at-Work interview in this issue.

Melissa Pritchard is the author of a novel, *Phoenix*, and a story collection, *Spirit Seizures*, for which she received the Flannery O'Connor Award. She is a visiting assistant professor at Arizona State University where she teaches creative writing.

POETRY

Agha Shahid Ali, recipient of a 1993 New York Foundation for the Arts poetry fellowship, teaches in the MFA program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. His books of poetry include *A Nostalgist's Map of America* and *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems*. He translated Faiz

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Ahmed Faiz's *The Rebel Silhouette* and is the author of a scholarly work, *T.S. Eliot as Editor*.

Ingeborg Bachmann, born in Austria in 1926, was the recipient of many major awards, including the Berlin Critics Prize, the Austrian State Prize for Literature and the Bremen Award. She died in 1973 in a fire in her Rome apartment. Her translator, **Peter Filkins**, teaches at Simon's Rock College of Bard. His translations of Bachmann's complete poems, *Songs of Flight*, will appear this fall. He has been a Fulbright scholar, and his work has been published in *Partisan Review* and *The New York Times Book Review*.

Maureen Bloomfield's poems have been published in *Poetry*, *Shenandoah*, *The New Republic*, *The Kenyon Review* and *Partisan Review*. She lives in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Cathleen Calbert was awarded the "Discovery"—*The Nation* prize in 1991. Her poems have appeared in *The New Republic* and *The North American Review* among other publications, and she has work forthcoming in *Feminist Studies*. She is an assistant professor at Rhode Island College.

Anne Babson Carter's poems have appeared in *The Nation*, *Theology Today* and *The Western Humanities Review*.

Jane Cooper's fourth collection of poems, *Green Notebook, Winter Road*, will be published this fall by Tilbury House, which also reissued her *Scaffolding: Selected Poems* in 1993. *Scaffolding* won the 1985 Maurice English Poetry Award. She lives in New York City.

Alfred Corn has written six books of poetry, most recently, *Autobiographies*. He teaches in the Graduate Writing Division at Columbia University.

Mike Decker's poems have appeared in *The New Republic*, *Poetry Review*, *Oxford Poetry Review*, *American Review* and other publications.

Ben Downing is an assistant editor at *Parnassus*. His poems have appeared in *Poetry* and *Southwest Review*.

John Drury teaches at the University of Cincinnati and is the author of *Creating Poetry*, a textbook, and *The Stray Ghost*, a chapbook of poems.

Clayton Eshleman teaches at Eastern Michigan University where he edits the magazine, *Sulfur*. Black Sparrow Press will publish the entirety of *Homuncula* this year. His translation of *The Complete Posthumous Poetry* of César Vallejo received the National Book Award in 1979.

Irving Feldman, a 1992 MacArthur fellow, is the author of *All of Us Here*. His book, *The Life and Letters*, will be published by the University of Chicago Press this fall. He teaches English at SUNY/Buffalo.

Stephen Gibson's unpublished collection *Rorschach Art* was a finalist in the 1993 National Poetry Series competition. His poems have appeared in *Poetry* and *The Mississippi Review* and are forthcoming in *Boulevard*, *Epoch* and *Vicious Circles: The Best Modern Sestinas*.

Marilyn Hacker is the editor of *The Kenyon Review*. Her next collection of poetry, *Winter Numbers*, will be published by Norton this October.

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Geoffrey H. Hartman is a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Yale. He edited *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* and is the author of *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture Wars* and *Akiba's Children*, a book of poems.

Stella Johnston teaches at Arizona State University. Her poems have appeared in *The New Republic* and *Western Humanities Review*.

Caroline Knox is the author of *To Newfoundland* and *The House Party*. Timkin Publishers will publish *Sleepers Wake* this fall. An assistant professor of English at the University of Connecticut at Avery Point, she received an NEA fellowship in 1986.

Philip Levine's last book of poems, *What Work Is*, won the National Book Award and *The Los Angeles Times* Book Award. He is also the author of *The Bread of Time: Toward an Autobiography*. *The Simple Truth*, a book of poetry, will be published by Knopf this November.

James Merrill's most recent book is *A Difficult Life*, a memoir. Knopf will publish a new poetry collection in the spring of 1995.

Gary Mitchner's poems have appeared in *The Best American Poetry 1991* and *The Western Humanities Review*.

Peggy Penn is a family therapist at the Ackerman Institute in New York. She is the author of numerous theoretical and clinical articles and the co-author of a book on the Milan method of family therapy. Her poems have appeared in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*.

Bin Ramke's most recent book is *The Erotic Light of Gardens*. He directs the creative writing program at the University of Denver and edits the poetry series for the University of Georgia Press.

Kay Ryan is the author of *Strangely Marked Metal*. Her poetry has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic* and *Tri-Quarterly*. She lives in Fairfax, California.

Grace Schulman's books of poetry include *For that Day Only*, *Burn Down the Icons* and *Hemispheres*. She is the author of *Marianne Moore: The Poetry of Engagement* and is poetry editor of *The Nation*. She is a professor of English at Baruch College, CUNY.

Reginald Shepherd was the winner of the 1993 Associated Writing Programs' Award in poetry for his book *Some Are Drowning*, which will be published by the University of Pittsburg Press this fall. He is the co-recipient of the 1993 "Discovery"—*The Nation* prize.

Kay Sloan is the author of a novel, *Worry Beads*, and the co-editor of *Elvis Rising*, an anthology of short stories. Her work has appeared in *Southern Review*, *The Michigan Quarterly Review* and *The Western Humanities Review* among others. She is an associate professor of English at Miami University of Ohio.

Jordan Smith is the author of three books of poetry: *An Apology for Loving the Old Hymns*, *Lucky Seven* and *The Household of Continuance*.

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INTERVIEWS

Shusha Guppy (Yves Bonnefoy interview) is the London editor of *The Paris Review*. She is the author of a memoir, *The Blindfold Horse*, and a collection of interviews, *Looking Back*, which was published by Paris Review Editions.
Jeanne McCulloch (Alice Munro interview) is an editor at *The Paris Review*.
Mona Simpson (Munro interview) is an advisory editor at *The Paris Review*. Her most recent book is *The Lost Father*.

FEATURES

Elizabeth Bishop was born in 1911 and died in 1979. Her work is reprinted by arrangement with Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Copyright 1994 by Alice Helen Methfessel. All rights reserved.
Umberto Eco's most recent collection of essays is *Misreadings*. Harcourt Brace will publish *How to Travel with a Salmon* this Fall. His translator, **William Weaver**, is at work translating Eco's newest novel.
May Swenson was born in 1919 and died in 1989. Her work is reprinted with the kind permission of Zan Knudson.

ART

John Alexander is represented by the Marlborough Gallery in New York City.
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NOTICE

Back in 1959, somewhat disturbed by the bleak contents of *The Paris Review*, Gertrude Vanderbilt, a great friend of the magazine, established a $1000 humor prize in her name to be given when the editors saw fit. Winners selected by the editors over the years included Terry Southern, Hughes Rudd, Bowden Broadwater, Stanley Elkin, Rosalyn Drexler, Mordechai Richler and Paul Spike. In 1970 the prize was discontinued. Then in 1984 John Train, former managing editor of the *Review*, stepped forward and announced he would like to continue the prize under his own name . . . to give matters a little push in a "jollier direction," as he put it. His hope was to find the kind of urbane and ironic material that marks *The London Spectator*. To make sure that his taste prevailed, he stipulated that the editors would do the initial sifting but that he and some outside judges, including Brendan Gill, would make the selections.

Frankly suspicious of the comic aperçu of "outsiders," the editors bypassed the jury system that Train requested and made the selections themselves, hoping that what was picked would be appropriate to the spirit of the prize. Alas, no such luck. Not enough ironic urbanity! Train didn't like what he read (when he took the trouble to read the magazine), and though he admitted an occasional "note of levity" in the published stories, "no giggles." Thus the magazine itself was forced to pony up the prize money ($1500 per) to the likes of T. Coraghessen Boyle, Stephen Dixon, David Foster Wallace, Edna O'Brien, Padgett Powell, Robie Macauley and Dan Leone. This continued until the magazine had forked out over $6000—pleasing the recipients no end, especially those who weren't aware they had been entered in a humor contest. The practice, of course, put a hefty strain on our financial situation, which was not ameliorated by Train himself who saw no reason to pay up for anything he didn't think was funny.

Since paying off the humor winners without help from a patron could eventually spell financial doom, it seemed wise to drop the prize and try something else. Thus we have established a "Discovery" prize—which in fact best suits the original precept on which *The Paris Review* was founded: that is, to give special consideration to publishing the works of unknown

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writers. Backing has been found by a patron who wishes to remain anonymous. Indeed, the first Discovery Prize has already been awarded—to Marcia Guthridge for a story of hers which appeared in #128 entitled "Bones." It was awarded at a dinner at which other Paris Review Awards were given out (the Aga Khan Fiction Prize to Charles D'Ambrosio and the Bernard F. Conners Poetry Prize to Stephen Yenser) and at which a Ukranian pianist named Zuk played some Scriabin and Liszt. A joyous occasion! Especially so since Mr. Train, though not in attendance, allowed me to announce that if any of the fiction winners for the year exuded sufficient "urbanity" and/or "irony," he would be delighted to add $1500 to the prize. Has this muddied the waters? I suspect so, but that's the situation with the prizes as of this moment . . .

—G.A.P.

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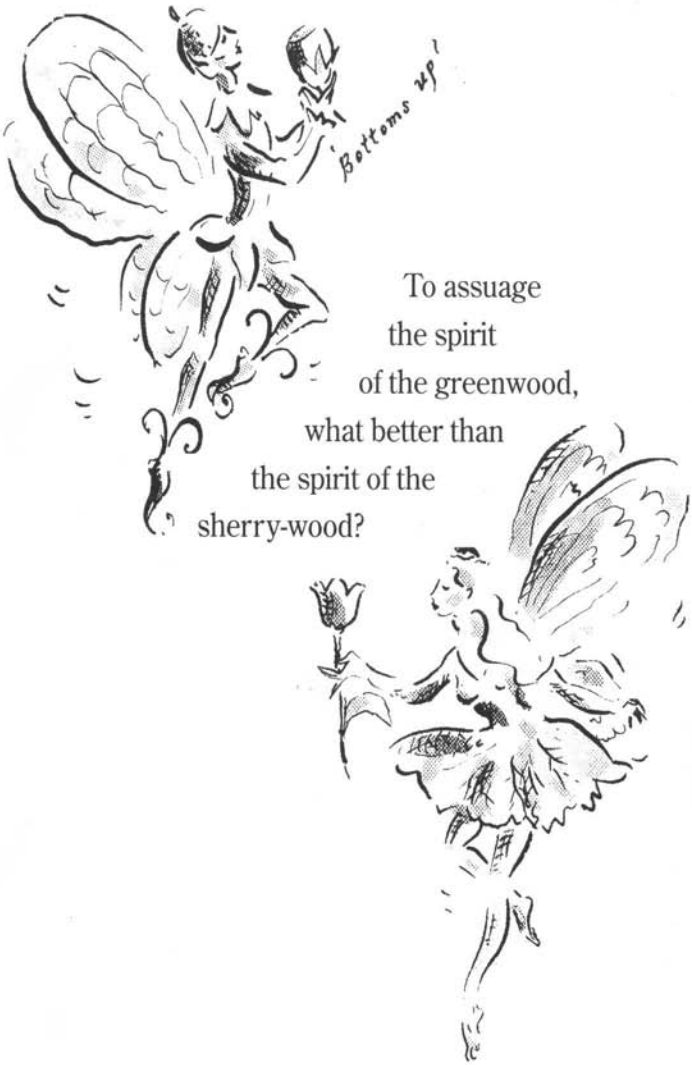

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